

Indian-European Combination

MY INDIAN FAMILY. By Hilda Wernher. New York: The John Day Co. 1945. 298 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by EMILY HAHN

THIS was to be expected, said the all-wise reviewer, picking up the book and riffling through the pages of the first chapter. This sort of thing, she said easily, is in the wind. No doubt we will have more and more books about interracial marriage. Though I must admit that in my experience it's more often a book about a Chinese-European combination than an Indian-European. But this'll be the same thing. Sooner or later somebody in the book will quote East is East and West is West and Never the Twain, etc. . . . Ho, hum, said the all-wise reviewer.

I probably started out reading "My Indian Family" with almost as unpleasant an attitude as that. I don't know quite why. I wasn't justified by experience: there haven't really been many books about interracial marriages. Undeniably, of course, there has been a lot of talk about it to which I in my time have contributed plenty. So why should I yell "Black, black," at this particular kettle?

Of course it's been awfully hot these last weeks. Then too the simple fact that the dust-cover called it "A Story of East and West within a Muslim home" set my teeth on edge a bit. The style, too, irritated me. To be perfectly frank, it still does, when I stop to notice it. Mrs. Wernher's manner of writing is not mine, and I don't envy it. However—I am now a fervent admirer of Mrs. Wernher's. I still can't go all the way for her literary style. When she is talking direct to the reader, telling a story or merely saying how she feels about Christmas or loneliness or this and that, I can admire her without effort. She can't write conversation, though. The minute she quotes anyone, be it her much-beloved daughter or her son-in-law or the servants or herself, the lines are painfully stilted.

You must understand that this doesn't matter, ultimately, a whit. This is a rare book and it tells a strange, poignant story. To begin with, it's the story of a rare woman, but that is not all. Never mind that dust-cover. It will tell you that "My Indian Family" is fiction based on fact and actual experience, which is nonsense. There is nothing, nothing at all fictional about "My Indian Family." The truth is so evident that it is not hidden in the slightest degree. Nothing could hide it, or obscure the tale. To do her justice, Mrs. Wernher of all people did

not attempt to hide anything. A few names may have been substituted, a detail or two has been sacrificed to convenience, perhaps. This is nothing.

A white girl of European parentage, evidently Austrian and perhaps British, has just married a young Indian of the Muslim faith when the story opens. (It is written in diary form, by the girl's mother.) Mary Ann at twenty-three has visited India twice and is fascinated by the country. To an unusual degree in a girl her age she has studied the ethnology of India, especially comparative religions. Mary Ann's mother hushes her natural misgivings at her daughter's choice of a husband by telling herself how peculiarly fitted the girl is for the unusual situation which greets the two women. Two women it is because Rashid has insisted upon taking Mary Ann's mother, too, into the bride's new world.

'Mary Ann would be too lonely without you, Mother . . . Life in India is not easy.'

'But we love India!' Mary Ann's tone and expression left no doubt. . . . 'Now we shall know the real India . . . and that's what I've always wanted.'

She is ever watchful to dispel his apprehensions and misgivings concerning our future life. My darling girl! Though her marriage is not what I have wished for—far-reaching differences of religion, country and background prove a great handicap to happiness in the majority of "mixed" marriages—I try to live up to her courage and good will.

The dust-cover will tell you the plot, so I may as well, too. After only a few months in a small village where Rashid is head of a scientific Government laboratory, Mary Ann's mother as well as Mary Ann has found her innocent idealism much taxed by experience. The two women are faced every day, every hour, every moment with the necessity of walking gently for fear of offending their new friends. There are a dozen problems to grapple with—caste and its complications in daily life, housekeeping Indian fashion, and above all, inferiority complex. They run into that everywhere, most disconcertingly in Rashid himself. It is Rashid whose portrait is most vivid.



He is painfully sensitive, volatile, open and affectionate, yet sometimes a baffling mystery to his wife and her mother. Sometimes just when they have congratulated themselves on having achieved a happy normality with their surroundings, Rashid throws a spanner into the works by getting his feelings hurt, or suddenly growing suspicious of his darling's love and admiration. The early days of Mary Ann's married life were clouded because Mother did not kiss her son-in-law goodnight as she kissed her daughter. Mother didn't love him, stormed Rashid, and what was worse, she showed the world that she didn't love him. He complained bitterly to Mary Ann until she overcame the reserve with which she had grown up in her Western world, and spoke to her mother about it.

It is time to go to bed. I kiss Mary Ann, who pulls my sleeve quite unnecessarily. I haven't forgotten.

Rashid holds out his hand as usual. When I kiss him he stands quite motionless for a moment; then he puts both arms around me and holds me close. "Now I have a mother," he says under his breath.

I feel ashamed for not having had the sense to kiss him before.

The entire situation would have been impossible, perhaps, if any other two women had attempted to cope with it. But Mother and her Mary Ann are unusual in many ways other than those so often pointed out—perhaps too often—by their Indian friends. Not only are both women free of any poisonously vulgar race prejudice, not only are they sympathetic toward Indian beliefs and religions, but they are held together by a rare bond of love and understanding. When life grows a little heavy for Mary Ann to support, she can talk things over with Mother. When Mother, a woman who is after all only in early middle age, misses the busy, eventful, productive life which was hers in Europe, she forgets her homesickness watching her darling climb from triumph to triumph over vexatious little difficulties. Some of these difficulties are more than that. Rashid has unpleasant relatives. There are money troubles too. There is one great big quarrel over what seems to Mary Ann and to Mother a pitifully small reason. But never mind; these are small matters. Mary Ann is pregnant and everybody is happy.

Then there is an accident, and Mary Ann dies of concussion. Mother is left alone. All alone in India, with her Indian son-in-law her only mainstay. She loves Rashid, but he is alien just now in her time of anguish. Alone in spirit, Mother must lay out her child, must partake of the strange mourning festival, must live through night-

mare hours. Through the difficult medium of the diary form one feels the vivid pain of that long march behind the coffin, all the weary steps, all the cruel miles. At least one reader will not forget in a hurry that dull feeling of a heavy stone in the breast that means heartbreak. Somehow the real thing is evoked in that funeral march, step after step, page after page, through the milling crowds of sympathetic villagers. It is now that one begins to feel the true strength of the book, or perhaps I mean of Mother's spirit.

Rashid and Mother, drawn together by their grief, find that race at last is transcended. After this period the fretting question of color seems to grow less obtrusive. It is another matter which now fills their lives, a friction which grows, as the others grew, out of a difference of background and philosophy but which could be called a question of human values rather than of race. Rashid the Muslim, robbed of his bride, resentfully demands that Fate give him second best, at any rate. He will marry somebody, anybody and beget children. It is his dear Mother's task, thinks the Indian Rashid, to select this new bride. In India, one leaves all such matters to one's parents, and save for Mother, Rashid has no parents.

Mother is so horrified that she cannot discuss the matter for a long time. Her darling Mary Ann has been dead only a week! Communing with herself, she manages at last to see not Rashid's point of view, but at least the reason for Rashid's different attitude. However, she cannot become quite so adaptable all at once. Rashid, she argues, is planning to make some Indian girl a victim of his misery. She, Mary Ann's Mother, will not be party to such a crime. Mary Ann had planned to help India's women out of purdah; shall she, Mother, then contribute to some unnamed girl's humiliation by arranging to make her live as a mere breeding animal? No, Rashid must wait a decent time until he can judge a bride for himself. And Rashid, uncomprehending but always affectionate and obedient, waits.

It is tempting to go on and tell Mother's story in advance, but that would not be fair, nor adequate. The story holds you, but the book is much more than the story. Mother's own person slowly becomes the best part of the entire picture. Before we say goodbye to her we learn enough to be ashamed of our cheap early criticism. This is a natural rhythm of life which transcends every weakness of narrative, and her true story has that rhythm. More than that, the trim-

mings, the little facts, the difficulties of adjustment between European and Oriental temperament, the enormous weight of small annoyances, these add up somehow to a presentation of the East which is of immense value.

All of us, the Orient as well as the Western world, will learn to be very grateful that Mother decided to put

her story down on paper. Certain books, though they look ordinary enough, making no more noise than any item on the season's publishing list, are genuine documents worthy of the name. "My Indian Family" is such a book. It is a punctuation in ethnological history. It marks an end. More important, it marks a beginning.

Opera for the American Indian

MESA VERDE. A Verse Play. By Christopher La Farge. New York: New Directions. 1945. 111 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

SOME time ago Christopher La Farge, poet and story-writer, became interested in the suggestion of the Metropolitan Opera Company that he study the demands and limitations of the modern libretto, with the idea of his writing the book for a new American opera. Being the son of Grant La Farge, architect and artist (whose profession for awhile he followed and whose full name he bears), and the brother of Oliver La Farge, ethnologist, anthropologist, director of Indian affairs, and writer on the Indian, it is natural that his own thoughts also should turn toward the American Indian, as a subject for opera, as well as for art and fiction. Familiar with the legends of the Navajo and the myths of the Zuñis and Hopis, he had for some time been deeply impressed by the story of the cliff-dwellers of Mesa Verde, in Colorado, a people who vanished from their pre-Pueblo cliff-villages at the close of the thirteenth century—in a manner that is still a mystery—long before the caravels of Columbus came to America. In their mysterious and tragic story he was assured of a deeply-rooted American theme; and here he has reconstructed the circumstances of that community life and death, with full attention to human values, and with the aid of whatever the present life of the Indians of the Southwest could tell him.

But Christopher La Farge has also created a vivid dramatic and tragic story, adapted to a setting of great

music, with its gorgeous prologue and epilogue of the Brother Gods presiding over the fortunes of the straying tribes. If the Indian names in the first instance seem a bit formidable, the consultation of the excellent Pronunciation Guide, at the end of the book, will quickly make them easy to say, and they hold their own music. The love story of Uténi and Asthón Hatáli, subject to the severe decrees of tribal custom, is beautifully elucidated. The progress of the tale, from the first "faint white glow of the ending of night" in "the shell-like cave of the Tsenahapilni," to the thunder and lightning of the end, when the enemy raiders loose their arrows on the fated pair, is incisive and absorbing. The language of the poem has fire as well as restraint, passion as well as dignity. The speech is convincing as is the ritualistic living, the superstitious fear, the conflict between youth, even then seeking for freedom, and age seeking to bind it.

Mr. La Farge has done distinguished work before this. He was at once mature novelist, lyric poet, and remarkable portrait-painter in his verse-novel, "Each to the Other," one of the finest poetic works of our time. Here he has made another medium entirely his own, that of the verse-play. It is not "poetic drama" in the old sense. It demands music to complete it; but all that words can say is here, and his explanations of the scene, and his directions as to the action, are explicit.

There was nobility in this primitive life, at war with the elements and the invader. There was strength to these people, strength and the sweetness of antique ceremony. The verse moves with their natural grace and dignity. The invocation and the dance fall naturally into place. Great opportunity is here for an effective presentation, which some day I hope to see. As drama to read—which I shall not spoil for you by telling the story—this is a book of firm structure and moving humanity. In primitive beginnings we seem to watch the tribulations of much such a world as confronts us now, in the supposedly enlightened twentieth century!

