

Ross Lockridge, Jr.—

Escape from Main Street

N A N E T T E K U T N E R

LATE LAST January, when I set out to interview Ross Lockridge, Jr., none of the press agents assigned to publicizing his "Raintree County" knew his whereabouts. The people at the Book-of-the-Month Club said he had settled in California; they had just issued a release that had Lockridge announcing, "California is a wonderful state in which to rear children." Metro - Goldwyn - Mayer, owner of the film rights to his book, wired me that he had already left California. Houghton Mifflin Co., his publishers, suggested that I telephone his father in Bloomington, Indiana. His father told me that Ross, Jr., was now living in Bloomington, where he had bought a house.

So I said to the editors of *Today's Woman* magazine, "You can't miss. For six years a young English instructor, married to his childhood sweetheart, supports her and four kids on twenty-five hundred a year. All the while he's writing a book. When it's published he wins a quarter of a million dollars! The important point," I insisted, "is that he doesn't go berserk. He and his wife settle down and buy all the things your readers want to buy—the house, the car, the furniture, the electric ice-box. What more could a woman's magazine want?"

The editors agreed to send me to Bloomington to interview Mr. and Mrs. Ross Lockridge, Jr.

I had no trouble arranging an appointment. Ross wrote me, typing the note himself, and I went to Indiana at my convenience. I mention this because one press agent had assured me, "Lockridge is so vague you can't pin him down," and another had said, "He thinks he's the great American genius." If Ross Lockridge, Jr., exhibited such traits, then he was a schizophrenic personality. He cooperated with me completely, even offering to make hotel reservations for me. To me he seemed wistful, surprisingly boyish, delighted to talk to "somebody from the outside."

As my taxi drove up a small hill

and stopped before his grey shingled house, starkly new, my thoughts reverted again to the perfect slick-magazine story that I was going to write. Then I met the Lockridges, Ross and his very pretty, blonde wife, Vernice.

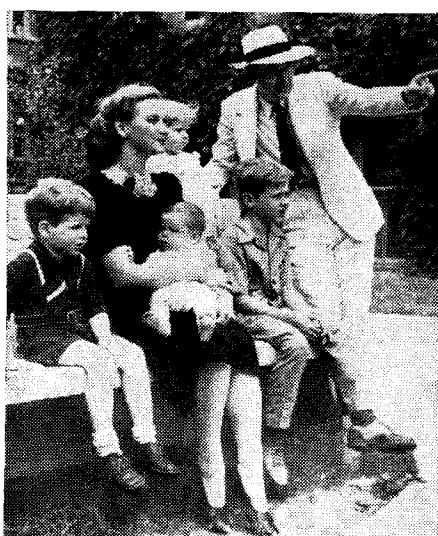
We sat in the living room that had the neat, barren look of a freshly decorated hotel parlor. Although they had been living in the house a month, no personal pictures hung on the walls. With the exception of two copies of "Raintree County" and a copy of "Red Plush" standing in the otherwise empty, glassed-in shelves of the secretary, there was not a book in sight, nor a bookcase.

I spoke of "Raintree County." "It's like a symphony."

Ross nodded appreciatively.

"Ross says that about 'The Magic Mountain!'" exclaimed Vernice. Then she blushed as if she had talked too much. "I never read a thing," she added hastily. "I haven't time."

Ross spoke of the reviews his book had received, especially the two which appeared in *Newsweek* and *The New Yorker*. They thoroughly angered him. "I don't think those fellows read the book through," he said.



The Lockridges—"as American as banana splits and apple pie."

—Acme.

Vernice told me how they had geared their lives to the writing of "Raintree County." "We tried to go out once a week. We had to rely on the kindness of a neighbor because we couldn't afford a baby-sitter. We were so broke Ross wrote on the back of his discarded papers. He would come home and write between classes, with the children running toy trains under his legs. It was grind, grind."

He smiled. "I wouldn't advise anybody to try it. I wouldn't do it again."

WHEN I suggested that his work had been influenced by Thomas Wolfe, he agreeably admitted that it was true. "I feel that I have a better historical background than Wolfe had," he added.

He spoke about the months he had spent revising the manuscript.

Vernice explained, "M.G.M. thought it would sell more copies if it were shorter."

"I could revise it eight more times," he said. "If you read it aloud . . . it scans. Now that it's finished I feel . . ." His voice died away expressively.

"Like having been eight years pregnant," he said.

"Although we were living in such close quarters—three rooms—Ross never talked to me about the book," Vernice volunteered. "Oh, I had a vague idea what it was about. But I didn't really know until I typed it."

Ross spoke of Dorothy Canfield Fisher, one of the Book-of-the-Month Club judges, and how much he would like to meet her.

Later, when I wrote Mrs. Fisher about Ross, she told me that "his reaction to suggestions from the Committee of Selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club was mature, not self-willed, not stubborn, very reasonable and intelligent, rather unusual with a young and untried author."

I asked him how he was getting along with his new book. He said that it was "terrible going." He pointed to an adjoining pine-paneled room and his paper-littered desk.

I asked if he had done anything in the recent war.

"Had too many responsibilities. Physical disabilities . . ." he mumbled.

Vernice's fresh voice took up the cue. "I can tell you I was glad when he was rejected. I was in the hospital having my second baby."

He was still mumbling, something about not having wanted to stand on the sidelines while the rest of the world . . .

I sensed a feeling of guilt. Perhaps this was the reason he had scrapped his first two years' work on "Raintree County," starting all over again so that he could shift the time from the twentieth to the nineteenth century. Maybe it was easier for him to forget his guilt, writing about the past.

He told me "Raintree County" was going to appear in a condensed version in *Omnibook*.

"But why?"

"Money."

Yet he certainly was not a commercially-minded writer. He did not even have an agent.

"A writer can do better for himself," said Vernice.

He did not belong to the Authors' League.

"Is that a kind of union?" Vernice asked when it was mentioned.

He spoke of his cousin Mary Jane Ward. "Oh, she made plenty of money out of 'The Snake Pit,' but she could have done better with her movie deal."

Ross told me he gave some of his prize money to relatives, and that Vernice's mother had bought a washing machine.

"Ross gave me a lot, too," Vernice said. "This minute I have more money in the bank than he has."

What did Ross Lockridge, Jr., buy for himself with his money?

"With the M.G.M. award some neckties and my first suit in five years," he told me. "With the Book-of-the-Month money, a second suit."

Did he buy freedom in which to breathe, to relax, to refill the creative vessel? Or did the money turn him into an advertising agent's idea of the perfect husband, a man with cash ready to purchase linoleum, gas heat, and three tiled bathrooms?

UPON winning the Book-of-the-Month selection, the Lockridges deposited their children with relatives and went to California. For like his dreamy hero, Indiana-born John Wickcliff Shawnessey, Ross Franklin Lockridge had watched others go West and was curious as to what was out there.

What did he and Vernice do in California? They hired a Ford, lived in a motel, and visited the M.G.M.



studios where they saw a Margaret O'Brien picture being filmed.

Vernice said she was disappointed that they hadn't seen Margaret. "But we saw Edward Arnold rehearse a scene. And I sat in Robert Preston's chair!" She was shocked at the prices of the California houses. "Fifty thousand for a place no better than this one! Why, they call two lots a ranch!" She giggled. "I wrote home and asked my sister if there were any houses for sale in Bloomington."

I looked closely at Ross Lockridge, Jr.'s patient echo. Her young, soft beauty, her sweet dignity masked the quiet granite-like stubbornness I encountered when I asked a question she did not want to answer. I noted her self-consciousness and defiance as she told me, "My father was a book-keeper," then, thinking better of it, changed the word to "statistician." She was proper and precise when she altered a mention of "brassiere and drawers" to "undergarments." She appeared thoroughly happy as she caressed a mammoth rib-roast with garlic and told me that now she could afford to "hire a woman to help with the work."

Ross Lockridge, Jr., loved her from the time they were in high school and she was afraid to speak to him "because he was the smartest boy in my class."

"She's Nell Gaither," Ross told me. "She definitely influenced Nell."

But Johnny Shawnessey never married Nell; his heroine was an unattainable dream.

I met Ross's mother, there to help mind the children while I conducted my interview. She displayed her Phi Beta Kappa key prominently, a mother proud of her son who had always won things—races, typing championships, scholarships to the Sorbonne, to Yale, to Harvard.

I met his sturdy historian father, whom other Indiana professors tell me is "an extreme extrovert." To his father Ross must have owed much of his knowledge, yet he ignored him in the book dedications. There again Ross followed the tradition of the good son, the good husband.

During the course of the afternoon I kept meeting the children: Ernest, asking for his allowance; Larry, wanting to know if I had hot meals on the train; Jeanne, running in and out of the room, piping, "Is it time to pass

the cookies, mom?;" and the baby, who was dressed and diapered by his writer father.

All the Lockridges were normal, nice, pleasant, kind; as American as the "Elsie" books, as banana splits and apple pie, as Thanksgiving dinners, and fireworks on the Fourth. And as smothering as your Aunt Tillie's feather bed.

It was late afternoon when he drove me back to my hotel, drove badly, with sudden stops and starts. On the wheel his hands were nervous and unsure.

He looked thin and pinched. "I can't sleep," he said. "I take sleeping pills."

"Maybe you ought to get drunk," I suggested.

"Maybe you've got something there."

But he wouldn't join me in a drink, insisting, "You grab yourself a couple of quick ones before dinner."

BACK in my hotel room I could see the courthouse built of native limestone, curiously reminiscent of the one in "Raintree County."

We dined together, Ross, Vernice, and I, in a tea-roomy kind of restaurant. Ross explained, "There are no interesting places to eat around here."

After dinner he drove me to the outskirts of Bloomington and pointed out the tall, tree-embroidered white frame house of his parents. It might have been a cousin to the two pictured on the inside cover of his book.

In front of my hotel we said goodbye. "Now I'll lie awake the whole night," he declared. "Vernice, here, she sleeps like a log. I haven't slept since I won those prizes."

Those were the last words he spoke to me. Later I received several letters from him.

In the first, he thanked me for visiting him and his wife "and for bringing a lot of illumination." He added, "Things go on much as before here, with everything down around our ears more and more. I hope to get out of the woods sometime, though it seems right when I need rest most I get least of it. Such is the way of the world, if I may be permitted a fragment of philosophy, having exhausted practically all my philosophy in RC." In another letter he refers to himself as being "ravaged by illness, additional family responsibilities, etc." (The etc. is his.)

In February, just before my article in *Today's Woman* went to press, he sent me a note in response to a query of mine about the make of his automobile. "The car is a Kaiser," he wrote. "Take care. I'm trying to." A

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The World. *In the fall of 1944 the Dumbarton Oaks Conference came forth hopefully with a proposal for a world organization to maintain the peace. Soviet Russia in that year was our tough-fisted and respected ally, American troops were fighting in northern Italy, and relations between Spain and the United States were much the same as they had been since our recognition of Franco's regime in 1939. And in 1944 "Forever Amber" and Bob Hope's "I Never Left Home" broke all publishing records. . . . In this year of 1948 we review below Sumner Welles's eloquent plea in support of a tottering United Nations organization, a true story of Russian spies in Canada, the memoirs of an ex-enemy Italian admiral, and a book deploring that relations between Spain and the United States are much as they've been since 1939.*

Repeating a Tragic Error

WE NEED NOT FAIL. By Sumner Welles. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1948. 143 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by BARTLEY CRUM

THIS is an admirable, a sobering, a frightening book. Mr. Welles has written it out of a profound conviction that our own safety, and that of humanity, depends upon the success of the United Nations—that is, upon the success of collective action by the community of nations. In the Palestine issue he sees—as I see—the supreme test of this thesis, believing it to involve not only humanitarian issues and justice, but very largely the future of the United Nations and our own country.

Mr. Welles's theme, I think, may be stated something like this:

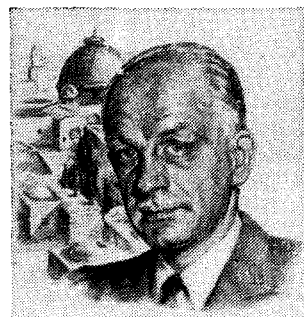
The fate of Western civilization may well be determined by the course of American foreign policy. That foreign policy, as evidenced by what we have done and failed to do in the United Nations with regard to Palestine, has not merely crippled that international body. At a moment when we sought to rally the countries of Western Europe to our leadership in the face of Soviet expansion, it sharply shook their confidence in us. Our reversal on partition, particularly our contention that the Security Council has no right to enforce a political settlement, has led other countries to believe that we seek to use the United Nations as an instrument of our own national policy rather than in furtherance of the cause of collective security.

To Mr. Welles, Palestine is the test of the United Nations today precisely as Manchuria was the test of the League of Nations in 1931. The League failed because the major powers, for reasons of selfish expediency, refused to give it the strength to enforce its

authority. We are now repeating this tragic error. The American people deserve to know it.

What should we have done about Palestine, and what can we yet do? In answering these questions Mr. Welles has done a magnificent job. He has done it in less than 150 pages of trenchant writing. His book is Palestine and the UN in a nutshell—and an analysis of the background against which today's events in and about Palestine are taking place.

THE AUTHOR: Sumner Welles has been called "America's conscience" and a "diplomat's diplomat," uncommonly complementary terms. Whether he had already picked his portfolio at Groton, he had at Harvard. Accordingly, he absorbed dollops of economics and—with a cool, blue eye on Latin America—Iberian culture. Whimsically dispatched to Tokyo as Embassy Secretary in 1915, he swung down, two years later, to Buenos Aires and by 1921, aged twenty-eight, was Latin-American Affairs Division Chief in Washington. He differed with Coolidge, resigned, and wrote "Naboth's Vineyard," a Santo Domingo history that lashed at our dollar-and-dagger diplomacy, pleading a policy later labeled "Good Neighbor." As Cuban Ambassador in 1933 he tried it out, under sanguinary circumstances. It was declared a failure, and the stiff-backed, courtly statesman was recalled. Before departing, as token of U. S. sincerity, he set the death-trap for the abhorrent Platt Amendment, which permitted us to intervene there at will. Until 1937 he was Assistant Secretary of State, then Undersecretary to 1943, when friction prompted his resignation. He was measurably responsible for the defensive alliance of Hemisphere nations, projected anti-Nazi strategy with Hull and FDR, pressured UN charter completion before the war ended. Along the angelic path he stumbled twice: once, in blurred devotion to Latin America, by supporting Franco; again by pre-Munich Axis appeasement—along with some other very important people. Recent years have seen his books "Four Freedoms," "The Time for Decision," and "Where Are We Heading?" and, since 1943, a weekly *New York Herald Tribune* column. He is now summing up immediate origins of World War II for 1948 publication, plans a European trip soon as "a working newspaperman." Alarmed that "the UN is functioning on one cylinder," he hopes for an aroused public. "If it fails, there will be insanity and, inevitably, a third world war."—R. G.



In a compact summation of the Palestine story from the Roman invasion in 135 A.D. to President Truman's recognition of Israel on May 14, 1948, Mr. Welles makes crystal clear a basic fact many persons seem to forget: that the Jews are not "invaders" in Palestine. "There is no ground in law or in equity upon which the Arabs can base their claim to possess the right of sovereign jurisdiction over Palestine," he writes, and substantiates this statement.

Highlighted through his book are men and events—Theodor Herzl, the God-consumed Viennese journalist who wrote "The Jewish State," Dr. Chaim Weizmann, now President of Israel, and his contributions toward winning the Balfour Declaration, and last—and least—Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin (who in my hearing promised that Britain would accept the recommendations of the ill-fated Anglo-American Committee, and then proceeded to toss those recommendations out the window). Mr. Welles traces the steady whittling down of the international promise to the Jews, culminating in the British White Paper of 1939 with its restrictive immigration and Nuremburg racial land laws. He gives us the sad and bitter story of the Jewish DP's and "illegal immigration" into Palestine, the numerous committees of inquiry, and