

**Fiction.** *Two distinguished novels reviewed this week deserve serious attention because they illustrate the unique problems of today. Storm Jameson's "The Black Laurel" reveals the corrupting influence of degradation and misery on the minds of Englishmen sent to rule Western Germany. Humphrey Slater's "Conspirator" tells the frightening story of the Britisher of high rank and birth who becomes a Communist, then a traitor, and finally a spy for the Kremlin. Involved in both are moral issues that lie at the heart of world turmoil, first elaborated in Rebecca West's "The Meaning of Treason." As antidotes to this painful research into the conscience of modern man, you will find Marion Hargrove's "Something's Got to Give," a sparkling comedy of love and the radio. The Chilean novelist Maria-Luisa Bombal offers another kind of relief in "The Shrouded Woman," a fine example of the tortured love romance that flourishes in South America, compelling in spite of its exotic and oddly Victorian flavor.*

## Berlin Tragedy

**THE BLACK LAUREL.** By Storm Jameson. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1948. 338 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by HARRISON SMITH

**B**ERLIN—a few months after the occupation — a Walpurgis Night scene of ruins and dead houses where half-starved men, women, and children lived in moldy cellars or disintegrating tenements and crawled like lean rats over streets choked with rubble, breathing the odors of dust and corruption—this is the bleak background of Storm Jameson's novel of English conquerors and defeated Germans. The novel is haunted with forebodings of disaster, with the sense that civilization is in peril, and that the men who have been sent to rule chaos and bring order out of dissolution may sink along with the wretched victims into a bottomless gulf. Since this gifted novelist is writing of the conflict between the motives of men and the struggle to endure the sight of torn and bleeding Europe, her story is of less importance than the moral issues involved.

Gary, a millionaire with vast power and political ambitions, on the surface a cultured and charming English gentleman in the best tradition, gathers around him men he believes can serve his hidden plans. They are eager to serve, for to most of them the end of the war has meant the loss of careers. For the secure future he offers them, he expects blind devotion to himself and to his idea that he alone can save the world. They are an interesting and diverse group whom he watches and guides with shrewdness and with the affectionate contempt of a wise father toward his erring and weaker sons. There was Major General Lowerby, who

could not bring up his three sons on his pension and so became an opportunist. Major Brett, the general's assistant, was intelligent and honest, but he was cursed with a tongue that ran away with him, a wife who was unfaithful, and a beautiful daughter he did not know how to raise. Gary had also captured Flight Lieutenant Arnold Coster, a thoughtful and quiet young man who served him as his air pilot, and who reminded him of his dead son. He established himself and his followers in the magnificent suburban country house of a German nobleman who became involved with most of the other characters in a strange conspiracy that finally destroyed Gary's plans.

One of Gary's motives in coming to Germany was to enlist as a disciple a German philosopher of the deepest integrity who is revered by millions of his countrymen. Lucius Gerlach had lost faith in the future of man. He believed the next war would blot

out every present civilization, and he was beginning to preach that German salvation lay in atonement for guilt and the acceptance of poverty. The cold cynicism of his old friend revolts him. The secret order Gary is trying to found to rule Europe, so that for the first time in history power would be in the hands of one man, he knows to be pure Fascism. "You will fail, too," he told Gary, "even if they don't revolt against you—if you can persuade them to live in a world without conscience or freedom, without justice—even then your human atoms will die of boredom." He was the first to recognize the strain of madness in Gary, who had asked him,

Why should I respect a myth? Hasn't it lasted long enough—the myth of man's indestructible spirit? Indestructible, and under God, free? Let me tell you and all the other nursemaids that men can be created in any form. With X-rays we can break up the chromosomes and shake up the genes in them. If order depends on making men less unreliable, it can be done.

Among all the ambitious realists, the self-seekers who came to Germany to find jobs in the commissions and bureaus and agencies in the British Zone there were few who seemed to have any faith in what they were trying to do, as if the spectacle of degradation and ruin about them had in itself the power to corrupt. It became the duty of David Renn, a British agent, to send to trial for murder and attempted robbery a German art expert who was trying to track down some of the loot stolen from Polish museums. Nearly everyone knew the man was innocent; Gary alone could have saved him, but contempt for the life or death of any individual unimportant to him would not permit him to raise his hand.

The trial and execution of this almost unknown man, caught in the relentless chain of events, is the slen-



Storm Jameson: "I got a vision of Europe which both horrifies and encourages me."



Marion Hargrove aims his blast "at the sham and pretense of the 'sophisticated' world."

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der thread on which the story is suspended. The conscience of the new rulers of Western Germany was awake but stifled by their cynicism and bewilderment. The art dealer had been defended by Gerlach; and when the philosopher was murdered by his crippled nephew, whose soldier father was, perhaps unfairly, executed in an English prison camp, the chain of senseless cruelty was complete.

"The Black Laurel," Storm Jameson's twenty-sixth book, is the result of official trips to Europe in 1945 in which she visited Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Germany. She is quoted as saying, "During both these trips I got a vision of Europe which both horrifies and encourages me." In the pages of this novel it is difficult to see any trace of encouragement for the future in her exploration of the depths of misery and degradation in which her characters are plunged, nor do any of them, however complex or ingenious, believe in themselves as saviors or in any hope or future for the heart and center of Europe. This is certainly one of the most readable and thoughtful of the several novels of its kind that have recently appeared, but like the rest it is confused and somewhat obscure, as if everyone, conquerors and conquered, walked in the shadow of destruction and hopelessness, only waiting for the approaching final storm to obliterate the ruined cities and blacken the earth itself.

## Baby Talk

SOMETHING'S GOT TO GIVE. By Marion Hargrove. New York: William Sloane Associates. 1948. 312 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by RICHARD B. GEHMAN

UNTIL the appearance of this first novel, Marion (See Here, Private) Hargrove was a young man on the spot. The book that shot him into nationwide prominence in 1942 was an amateurish effort; it came at precisely the right time, however, when its subject—the predicament of a civilian turned soldier—was everyone's concern, and his reputation was made. Since then, people have been expecting something more from him—something more and, since he was a very young man in 1942, something better. He had two alternatives: he could have rushed into print the minute he pinned on his discharge button, with a "See Here, Citizen Hargrove," or he could have chosen to wait for another book idea that he wanted to do. If only to save face, his new book had to be good. Mr. Hargrove waited six years. He has now produced a fresh,

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