

Sad Little Paisans

A TALE OF POOR LOVERS. By Vasco Pratolini. New York: The Viking Press. 396 pp. \$3.50.

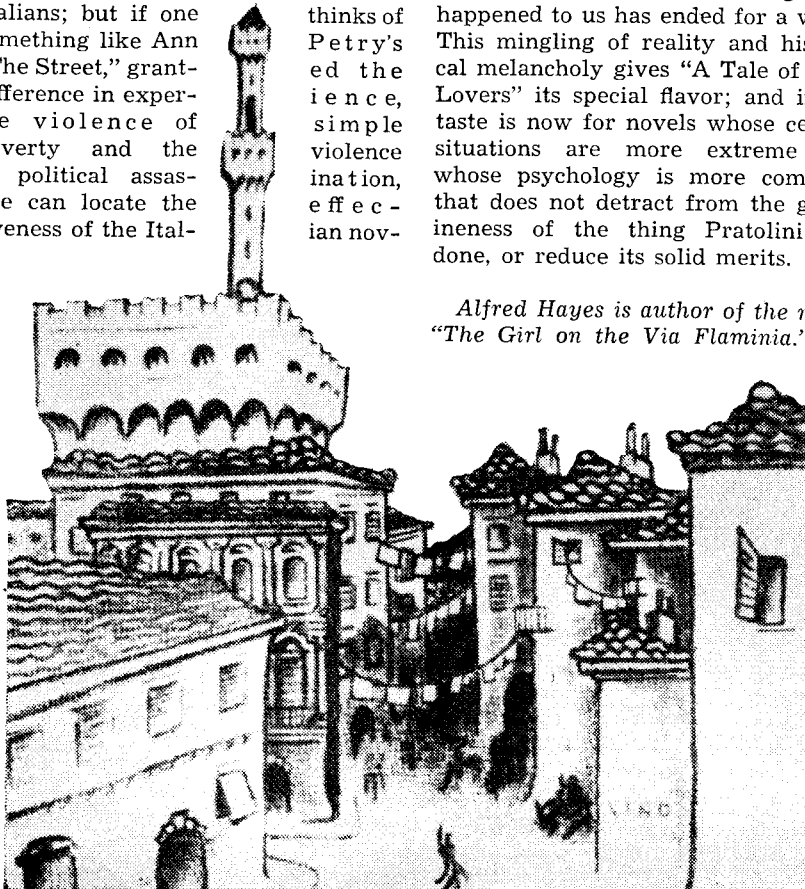
By ALFRED HAYES

IN 1925-26 Mussolini completed his consolidation of power, and Fascism entered its "moderate and legal" phase. Socialism, centered in the big northern cities, had been defeated; the twenty years of power were under way. For an Italian who experienced that climactic period in the peninsula's long history, whose memories of it are confined to and bound up with the street he lived on, the neighbors he knew, the day-to-day episodes that finally assumed a perceptible historical pattern, the looking backward now when Italy has entered another political phase must bring with it a feeling akin to what one used to call fate. That is, the past seems fixed and irrevocable, the crimes committed immutable; only the anger has been softened by time, the political tragedies have become elegaic.

This, in substance is the tone that dominates Vasco Pratolini's novel "A Tale of Poor Lovers," which appeared in Italy two years ago and was rather widely liked by the Italian press. That tone may not have for us the significance and the intimate weight which it has for the Italians; but if one thinks of something like Ann Petry's "The Street," grant-difference in experience, the violence of poverty and the of political assassination, one can locate the effectiveness of the Italian novel.

el. Pratolini's book is an example of what has been called "the romanticism of the real," and the task he has set himself is to chronicle the effects of the solidification of Fascist power upon a Florentine back street, the Via del Corno. "It is rather a neglected street," says Mario, in the final scene of the book, "with all its gossip and the wretched poverty of its people. But we and they are of the same clay." Pratolini knows that in the Via del Corno sex is the fate of the women, politics of the men. Carlino, the accountant who has become a squadristo, will murder Maciste, the Socialist blacksmith; Milena's husband will hesitate to contribute to a Fascist aid fund, and be maimed for life by the blackshirts; Milena will have her lover taken away by detectives; and the young girls will meet their destinies on the empty sacks in a coal cellar or in the rooms of the Albergo Cervio. The Via del Corno's fate will be, in this historical perspective, to endure for a while the weight of the corporate state. Time has changed all that happened twenty years ago into this not-too-bitter elegy, into a sort of faded diary that we kept once full of our crimes, our sufferings, our mistakes. We are not sure that it will not come again, or that the violence will not repeat itself; there is always that possibility in the Via del Corno; we are only certain that something that happened to us has ended for a while. This mingling of reality and historical melancholy gives "A Tale of Poor Lovers" its special flavor; and if our taste is now for novels whose central situations are more extreme and whose psychology is more complex, that does not detract from the genuineness of the thing Pratolini has done, or reduce its solid merits.

Alfred Hayes is author of the novel "The Girl on the Via Flaminia."



—From the jacket of "A Tale of Poor Lovers."

Big Bungalow, Ceylon

ELEPHANT WALK. By Robert Standish. New York: The Macmillan Co. 278 pp. \$3.

By PAMELA TAYLOR

"IT is not wise, Master, to make enemies of the Elephant People." Thus big Tom Carey was warned when he picked the site on which he intended to build his gigantic teak-wood bungalow. Certainly there was no more magnificent location in Ceylon than the small plateau where a spring bubbled, cupped in a valley from which, in fifteen years of work and vision and courage, Carey had beaten back the jungle and made a great coffee plantation. That it lay directly across a track beaten, from time immemorial, by the feet of elephant herds seeking the cool green hills, impressed him not at all.


So the Big Bungalow, begun in 1863, and built for Tom Carey's children, and his children's children, rose to be the wonder of the countryside; and a small herd, driven out of the drought-ridden valleys below, found men digging and building on the elephant walk; an old bull elephant charged the workers and was killed; a baby bull was wounded and his mother trapped in a pit of the men's making. The baby escaped with the remainder of the herd, but he was never to forget the place, the terror and the pain connected with it.

To this bungalow Tom Carey returned from England in 1868, leaving his young bride behind him; there he read the cable telling him she had died in giving birth to a son, and there he faced the great blight of 1869, which wiped out the coffee planters of Ceylon. By the time his ten-year-old son was sent out to him the trade mark of his "Elephant Walk Tea" was already famous. It was a flourishing business which George Carey inherited from his father. He also inherited the Big Bungalow, stocked, furnished, and run on a scale of princely lavishness, and the hatred of the Elephant People.

"Elephant Walk" is the story of George Carey, who lived too long in the shadow of his father's legend; of Appuhamy, the Sinhalese major domo who kept Tom Carey's legend alive with fanatic devotion, loving the son because of his father, the Big Bungalow for its builder. Most of all it is the story of Ruth, the wife whom George Carey met at an English village tennis party and brought back to accustom herself as best she could to a life of isolation, a husband whom she had chosen because of ambition

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The Right to Have Opinions

IN THE discussions about modern poetry that have resulted from the publication of Robert Hillyer's articles attacking the Library of Congress Award to Ezra Pound [SRL June 11, June 18], it is a commonplace to hear statements like this: "I cannot understand some of the modern poets and so I have not the right to talk about them." Or, "In spite of what you say, 'The Pisan Cantos' may be the best poetry published last year. I can't read it; but if a group of well-known critics agrees that you are wrong, perhaps you are wrong, and they may be right." Or, "I could not make sense out of 'The Four Quartets,' but T. S. Eliot is known to be the greatest poet writing in English of our day; and if he believed that 'The Pisan Cantos' deserved the award, who am I to deny it?"

It is difficult to find any satisfactory reply to the state of mind illustrated by this blind acceptance of greatness in poetry that may be incomprehensible to the intelligent reader or too obscure to be followed with pleasure. The speakers offer a blank check to the poet and critic and regard the signature as worth its weight in gold.

One answer can be made, if you wish to continue an argument that becomes increasingly futile. You may say, "I know that you are a man of culture; you are well-read and have a sensitive appreciation of literature. You know the value of words; you have volumes of poetry on your shelves." Or you may say, "I am not

questioning an unlettered man. If I wanted your opinions on a score of contemporary novels, you would not hesitate to give them, no matter what others have said. Poetry consists of written words which are not alien to your vocabulary."

But neither satire nor tacit recognition of a man's knowledge and sensitivity will stir the hallucinated victims of the priests of poetry, or indeed of any of the other arts. They have spoken, and no man outside the charmed circle can reject their judgments. Whether designed or not, this is authoritarianism with a vengeance.

One of our reasons for printing Mr. Hillyer's articles and the editorials and letters that followed was founded on a desire to bring the subject of modern poetry, and by implication of modern art, into the daylight. We were aware that the choice of Ezra Pound's "The Pisan Cantos" for the Bollingen Prize as the best poetry of 1948 could not be defended by any large group of rational men. Indeed, this unfortunate award was not even approved by the head of the Library of Congress, which sponsored it. It seemed to us that the Fellows in American Letters had gotten themselves into a hole from which they could not extricate themselves and that they were therefore subject to criticism. We felt that this criticism was concerned with matters which were of interest to the general public and that it might involve the infallibility of the cult itself and, finally, lead to the destruction of its power to offer judgments and to award prizes of national significance. It might even be possible that the intelligent, cultured man we are discussing might eventually open his eyes and announce, "I have the right to say that this poem is nonsense. I know that it

is deeply admired by many whom I respect, and I admit their right to their opinions. Let us go our separate ways in peace." —H. S.

The Magazine Mission

IN SIXTY-THREE cities throughout the world the Department of State has established United States Information Service Libraries with reading rooms and rental services which are run very much the same as public libraries in this country. These libraries attempt to bring to the local people in forty-three countries a cross-section of American printed material in the form of books, magazines, newspapers, pamphlets, etc. The demand for this material among the local populations has increased steadily until now, with its limited budget, the Department of State is unable to keep up with the expressed interest of the local reading public.

This is particularly true in the current magazine field because in this way the foreign reader is able to keep up with current affairs in technical, scientific, cultural, and literary fields. One of our most pressing demands has been for more and more good current magazines which can be distributed in foreign countries to libraries, schools, universities, and other places where the interest in all things American seems to mount daily.

In a recent letter the Department of State has asked *The Saturday Review* to request our readers to send us their names and addresses if they care to assume the obligation of sending a subscription to overseas libraries and to selected individuals. Please address your communications to the Foreign Service Department, Saturday Review, 25 West 45th St., New York 19, N. Y.

Island Fishermen

By Daniel Whitehead Hicky

WITH sunset now, and ripening of the tide,
The day's bright catch a thing for memory,
Fishermen bronze as nets the sun has dried
Turn to a smaller doorway than the sea,
Taking the dim streets in a motley crowd,
Their salty words and laughter lifting higher,
Leaving the gulls behind them in a cloud,
The small boats rocking, arguing with the pier.
Deserted and forgotten now with night
The boats grow lonely like old fishermen,
Knowing no voice, no flare of cigarette
To break the darkness settling warm and plain,
Only the echo of a wave's far roar,
A pale wind breathing silver to the shore.