

eration's most characteristic poetry at all. They may well think that we have set too high a value on verbal mysteries, prosodic eccentricities, ambiguities, and ambivalent symbolism; that the satisfaction experienced by our critics in the presence of many contemporary poems has too often come, not from the poetry itself, but from the critical puzzler's sense of triumph at a riddle solved. Even if this does not occur, there is a chance that Mr. Eliot's extensive dependence on other men's words will prove a heavy burden for his poems to bear for very long—after all sources have been discovered by delighted discoverers—and that he will stand condemned by the rule of his own statement: "The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique and utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something that has no cohesion." . . . His [Eliot's] most serious and mature poems may, indeed, largely disintegrate into quotations. . . .

The errors produced by this mosaic style among aspiring new critics are frequent and supply amusement for the well-read. Elizabeth Drew, in her "T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry," doggedly analyzes a passage about a bird, a kingfisher, quite ignorant of the fact that the kingfisher is the halcyon, and is so used in Eliot's symbol—with a wink at the knowing—to avoid the phrase "halcyon calm." Mistakes like that give the whole show away. Three years ago in an article in *SRL* ["Meaning in Modern Poetry," March 23, 1946] Lloyd Frankenberg insisted at length that Eliot, in a reference to "jug-jug," was thinking of a chamber-pot, whereas, in fact, the Master was directly quoting (with ironic intent) from an Elizabethan song about the nightingale. And so it goes. It is all quite clearly a case of the blind misleading the blind.

Lastly, I note a decline in critical honesty. Compare two comments, one of them written seventeen years ago, the other, just recently. Both apply to one of Eliot's better known anti-Semitic passages:

My house is a decayed house,
And the jew squats on the window
sill, the owner,
Spawned in some estaminet of
Antwerp.

In 1932 Ruth Bailey, in her "Dialogue on Modern Poetry," paraphrased these lines from "Gerontion" frankly and correctly: "The jew is international, the scum of Europe and its landlord, and the house which he owns, the house of European civilization, is international, too; it belongs everywhere and nowhere." Now note carefully the sly euphemism with which Elizabeth Drew glosses over
(Continued on page 38)

Fiction. In Somerset Maugham's "Quartet" the reader will find something new in short-story collections. The familiar and polished text, written by the old master over seventeen years, can be compared directly with R. C. Sherriff's deft dramatizations of the same stories for the movies. The volume thus offers Maugham at his best, celebrates his seventy-fifth anniversary, and introduces the reader to a new form of film entertainment. Good reading is provided by three other books reviewed below. "The Last Miracle," by Karl Vollmoeller, is a romantic novel of an opera singer at the time of the French Revolution. Clyde Brion Davis in "Playtime Is Over" offers the refreshing story of a man's worldwide adventures, while "I'll Be Right Home, Ma," by Henry Denker, dramatically probes the grim realities of the boxing ring.

The Incurable Romantic

PLAYTIME IS OVER. By Clyde Brion Davis. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co. 432 pp. \$3.

By HARRISON SMITH

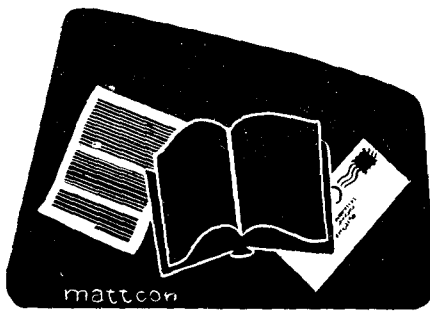
AS A WRITER no one has ever known quite what to expect of Clyde Brion Davis. Yet only he could have written a book like "Playtime Is Over." For he has the open-hearted expansiveness of the Westerner, the romanticism and the wry humor of the adventurer who has never caught up with his dreams. Christopher Morley said of his second book, "The Great American Novel—," that it was the saddest book of the year except that it was heartily amusing. "Playtime Is Over" is a sad and an oddly amusing book, too; and it is also written in the form of the diary of a man who sees the horizon closing in upon him but who against all reason believes that before it is too late a rainbow will still lead him to the pot of gold. Men like the Stephen Lewis of this novel can be extraordinarily exasperating to more rational minds, because they never will learn what they are or where they are going. They are like the habitual drunkard or the gambler who is always going to reform, who knows that everything will come out all right by some miracle, and at the same time is subconsciously aware

that the pattern of his life is fixed and inescapable.

Stephen Lewis had been running away toward adventure when fate caught up with him at the age of fifty. He had a fixed idea that marriage and social obligations and the responsibilities of a normal man were so many doors to a prison cell. The United States Marines and finally the Regular Army were his routes of escape to foreign lands and tropical islands where he could sleep casually with women and lead "a man's life." When the Army discovered that he had a bad heart he was retired with a pension and found himself again in his usual dual role, "elated by a curious sort of freedom," and depressed by his recollections of failure. Instead of going home to a Boston suburb and what's left of the family he retreats to a broken-down little farm in Arkansas to live like a hermit. This is his latest escapade, to discover what sort of a man he really is.

The diary that Stephen Lewis writes consists of the story of his past and the humdrum accounts of his daily life on his wretched little farm. He goes to town to pick up his pension check, repairs his broken-down shack, fences in his field, acquires a jackass and a dog, and makes friends with the colored farmer without whose aid and generosity he might have died. Somehow these ordinary events, written in the vein of a man trying to be an amateur philosopher, escape from being monotonously dull. It is a little like watching Robinson Crusoe creating a new life out of the sticks and stones around him.

But even this experiment can come to nothing. The check he receives from the Government every month barely covers his expenses. The long walk to the small-town library ex-



hausts him, and finally there are only a few books left he cares to read. Storms ruin his sad attempts to raise vegetables, his jackass is a useless nuisance, and his little dog dies. He has built up a kind of futile existence around him only to see it wither under his eyes. Now and then he gets drunk; his heart begins to pound, and he has to fight all over again the battle to keep on breathing, to stay alive. This is what actually happens to him, but the reader is rarely allowed to feel the true meaning of this adventure in loneliness. It is the author's special gift to paint a despairing picture in glowing colors.

The rest of Stephen Lewis's diary concerns his past which is equally futile. He might have gone to Harvard, but he ran away to sea as an oiler on a tramp steamer. He married a girl who tried to murder him. He joined the cavalry on the Mexican border; the First World War took him to France and Germany. The Marines sent him to South America, Haiti, and the Philippines. At the beginning of his diary he sums it up in this manner:

Now I am doubtless dead under the law of Brazil, officially dead in the United States Army, under sentence of death in Argentina, and executed by a firing squad of Marines in Haiti. Betty in Buffalo also may have believe she murdered me. Judith could assume that a coronary occlusion has taken me now. My name has been

expunged by my family in Massachusetts. And tomorrow I shall have been forgotten in New Orleans.

This brief summary leaves out the gaudiest of his escapades, his marriage to imperious Henriqueta, a Brazilian widow, a fabulously rich heiress who owns an empire of forests and plantations. Henriqueta had discovered that "Latins are lousy lovers," but the American sergeant of Marines she took to her bed in Rio was quite another story; so she steals our adventurer out of the Marines, takes him to her plantation palace, and marries him out of hand. When Stephen discovers that his role is to be simply a wedded gigolo, he begins to suspect why his predecessor, Dom Frederico de Pantana, had wasted away and died. He steals her diamond necklace, runs away, joins a fantastic and abortive revolution.

If Clyde Brion Davis had decided to make his hero a comic figure, or had designed his novel as satire, he could not have invented incidents or a character that would better have suited his purpose. Instead he tells his story with a straight, if slightly lugubrious, face. The book has reality because the reader is convinced that there are countless men like Stephen Lewis, men who are always trying to escape and always involving themselves deeper and deeper in tragedies that are so flamboyant that they are laughable.



THE AUTHOR: Liberal or no, Clyde Brion Davis is "still old-fashioned enough to regard fiction as an art form rather than a vehicle for propaganda," and the charge that he has used characters ventriloquially in various of his twelve books irks him. "I haven't found that cerebration is limited to people in the publishing world," he remarks retrospectively of a personal history that has criss-crossed our national economy. At fourteen he quit school in Missouri and became a printer's devil. He was subsequently a commercial artist, steam-fitter's helper, chimney sweep, furnace repairman, and electrician.

He picked fruit under peonage conditions, and as private detective once chased a fellow 400 miles across Wyoming in a taxi. He has been an amateur boxer, traveling salesman, rancher, and, in World War I, a soldier. All secondary to his career as newspaperman on the *Denver Post*, *Times*, and *Rocky Mountain News*, *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, *San Francisco Examiner*, and *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. He covered the Lindbergh-Hauptmann trial for the *Buffalo Times*, and in 1941 went to Europe for *PM*. At the University of Buffalo he taught journalism, at Rinehart he was for two years associate editor, and for ten months in Hollywood he just suffered. (What the film industry did to Mr. Davis's first novel, "The Anointed," as a Garson-Gable gimmick retitled "Adventure," saddens him.) He was recently surprised to find himself, a Democrat, elected justice of peace in Republican Salisbury, Conn., but he likes it fine. The duties are vague and give him leisure to continue the writing he began soberly with a maritime history, at age seven. Between times, among other works, there have been "The Great American Novel—," "The Arkansas" in the Rivers of America Series, "Sullivan," "The Stars Incline," "Jeremy Bell," and "Temper the Wind." The next will be nonfiction, but that's all he'll say about it. —R.G.

Symbolic Nun

THE LAST MIRACLE. By Karl Vollmoeller. New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce. 706 pp. \$4.

By CLAUDE HILL

THE late Karl Vollmoeller is known to Americans chiefly as the author of the elaborate pantomime "The Miracle," which Max Reinhardt staged between the wars. An eclectic and somewhat perfumed poet of "l'art pour l'art" at the turn of the century, he wrote a number of romantic verse dramas, and adapted for German audiences pieces by Gozzi, Dostoevsky, and Lope da Vega. Little was heard of him during the past two decades except that he left Germany during the Hitler regime and came to live in the United States. Shortly before his death last year he completed his first and only novel, at the age of seventy.

"The Last Miracle" is the story of a beautiful nun, Megildis, who leaves her convent and becomes a brilliant opera singer, accompanied by her lover, Adrian, a nobleman, and guided by her dark and sinister impresario, Marcel. Told with the help of an ingenious frame- and flash-back technique and painted against the broad canvas of late eighteenth-century Europe, the actual plot unfolds during the heights of the French Revolution, shifting from Paris and Rome to the capitals of the Western Hemisphere and back to Liechtenstein and Vienna. There is ample evidence in this book that the author has remained a confirmed aristocrat and romantic mystic and, above all, an ardent admirer of the Roman Catholic Church. He has recreated most convincingly that delicate mixture of religious sincerity and worldly-wise hypocrisy that forms the atmosphere in which the clergy lives. By contrast, Robespierre and his henchmen, indeed "the common man" of France, emerge as beasts, rogues, and swindlers. To the present-day reader, one of the most surprising and nostalgic revelations of the novel is the cosmopolitan ease with which Europeans were able to travel from one country to another in the age of the stagecoach, as contrasted with the "one world" of airplanes and visa restrictions.

Naturally a writer of Dr. Vollmoeller's stature aimed at more than a fast-moving cloak-and-dagger yarn in historical disguise. This reviewer, however, must confess that to him the significance of the "last miracle" in the title never became quite clear. When Megildis leaves the convent, the treasured statue of the Madonna