

Death for a Tyrant?

THE CARAVAN PASSES. By George Tabori. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts. 304 pp. \$3.

By VANCE BOURJAILY

GEORGE TABORI'S fourth novel is a rich and violent book, a book of trenchant ideas, stormy action, and urgently human beings. This is to say that Tabori thinks provocatively, writes strong narrative, and has the indispensable gift which makes a novelist good: everyone on whom his writing touches, be it only for a paragraph, comes to life.

The book has two heroes who never meet. One is Francis Varga, a ship's doctor who is a voluntary exile from the demands of ethical and political decision. The second hero is an Arab revolutionary named Marouf, whose exile is involuntary and who returns from it against heavy odds to become immersed in the same problems which Varga seeks to avoid.

When Varga's ship arrives at Port Aarif, principal city of an Arab state, the doctor is called ashore to operate on El Bekaa, the local tyrant. The populace, of whom Marouf is the leader, prays for El Bekaa's death. Thus the question is posed: shall Varga respect the sanctity of the patient-doctor relationship? Or shall he by a twist of the scalpel aid the cause of liberty?

FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT No. 404

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 404 will be found in the next issue.

KA CX BGKNADK MARX

AZ KNX KNGLFM HAD

BULK GM UL

GLOGMSXLMUCPX SUTK

AZ NUSSGLXMM.

—CXTKTULO TDDMXPP.

Answer to Crypt No. 403

Remorse is the echo of a lost virtue.

—BULWER-LYTTON.

It is a minor failure of the book that this dilemma exists for the reader but not for the doctor. The only appeals which reach Varga are bribe offers by the selfish and the vengeful; the voice of general suffering speaks a language which he does not understand.

Another more substantial failure is one of construction. During half the book we follow Varga, the officials, the neurotic Europeans; their story concluded we go back and follow Marouf and the lesser members of the populace over the same events. There may be a gain in irony, and it is possible, too, that the author wished by this method to emphasize the great distance between the viewpoints of the handful in command and the multitude commanded. But the method is a synthetic one, weakening the effect of organism. Instead of plot and counterplot building to a double climax in a big book we are presented with two circumstantially connected, slighter books. But that both have strength is proof of Tabori's enormous ability.

Tabori's control of English, a language to which he wasn't bred, is superb. He handles it with the unlabored eloquence and reckless accuracy of a poet. Varga's death, to pick an example, is as lovely and shocking a prose description as has come along in some time.

The breadth and depth of the author's understanding match his ability to express it. There is a beggar who lets the shoeshine boys polish his bare feet; his hunger for love is as compelling as that of the half-sane international whore who follows Varga ashore. There is a quiet Arab priest whose uneasiness touches us familiarly. There is a guided tour of a date plantation, as memorable as the unspeakable death of El Bekaa's daughter.

Tabori believes that mass-will moves towards justice. He denies that Western progress has much to offer Arab life. He has a strong sense of the power of the accidental—"Of those who plot," he quotes an Eastern proverb, "God is best." He treats sex as a powerful instrument of wounding and healing but not an all-powerful one. He tries to show that "every life that [is] not saintly . . . is, in fact, criminal." These and a dozen other well-defended concepts may be found in or deduced from "The Caravan Passes."

Of the people writing seriously today George Tabori is very much a man to watch. He's very much a man to read, too.

Vance Bourjaily is the author of "The End of My Life," a novel.

Jump into Nothingness

THE BURNED BRAMBLE. By Manès Sperber. Translated by Constantine Fitzgibbon. New York: Doubleday & Co. 405 pp. \$3.95.

By ROBERT PICK

ANTI-COMMUNIST—or more correctly anti-Stalinist—fiction has become as firmly established a literary genre by now as was the anti-Nazi novel of a decade ago. But while the latter without exception was written by people who from the first had despised and hated Hitler (and/or had been despised and hated by him from the first), the authors of anti-Communist stories are all former Communists or fellow travelers.

Their firsthand experience works both as an advantage and a drawback. The advantage is obvious even beyond the detailed inside knowledge at the disposal of these writers. The great drawback of their work is caused by the fact that none of them has ever really recovered from the blow dealt his own political dreams. Their discovery of Stalin's Russia being the "poisonous parody of [Socialism's] own truth" has filled them with a bitter sense of years misspent, so strong that it overshadows their account of the earlier trust and the longing of their characters. The protagonist of the typical anti-Communist novel is presented shortly before or shortly after his becoming disillusioned. The story of his illusions is permeated with the author's own better later knowledge. Ex-Communists, as a verbose character of the present book puts it, are men who "jumped into nothingness"; no wonder that what they tell from times antedating that "jump" is so truncated.

In that one respect Manès Sperber succeeds where his betters failed. He too shows darkness at noon—though what skill he has certainly cannot be likened to the great power of Koestler—but before showing you darkness he makes you feel the air of what once looked like dawn to him and his comrades. That remarkable achievement may be due to the primitivity of this author's technique and its directness.

At any rate you cannot help feeling compassion for the scattered group of German, Austrian, and Yugoslav Party members who are the heroes of his narrative. You cannot help siding with them in their fight against the police terror of King Alexander's Yugoslavia, the muddled authoritarianism of Schuschnigg's Austria, and the unabashed sadism of the Gestapo. The *Spartakus* veteran and leader of German Communist Labor, who is the novel's central figure, will for all his

ruthlessness command your respect long before he arouses your pity. In reading about the enthusiasm, the singleness of purpose, the courage, and the cunning of those Comintern-controlled revolutionaries in the early and middle 1930's you may grow forgetful of the old truth that "evil means start by corrupting good ends."

In short this new author manages to convey to you, unalloyed by the wisdom of later events, the full fervor of Central and Southeastern European Communists of that period. This is why the awakening of his characters to the real nature of Communism in power comes to you, as a reader, with the full impact of the blow which in 1937 struck Sperber and his comrades.

Polish-born, a trained psychologist who has lived in Vienna, Dalmatia, and Berlin, he broke in 1937 with the Party. He lived in Paris afterwards and volunteered for the French Army in 1939, somehow survived the Nazi occupation of France, and later worked for Malraux's propaganda office.

He is not a novelist of distinction. The sheer quantity of what he feels he must say nearly destroys his book. He jumps from one character to another without keeping the threads in hand. He introduces the figure of an aged, well-born Austrian scholar and humanist, who for pages and pages keeps lecturing and musing and bickering about the follies of history—a shopworn device if ever there was one. Also, the novel is much too long.

Curiously, M. Sperber's women characters are rather impressive. Through them the withering of human relationships among Party workers becomes tragically visible and in a way symbolic of that shadowy world where men and women "[hide] the fraud with lies [so that] the lies become truth and the fraud will be fraud no longer."



—Harcourt.

Manès Sperber—"what looked like dawn."

Queensberry Rules in Algiers

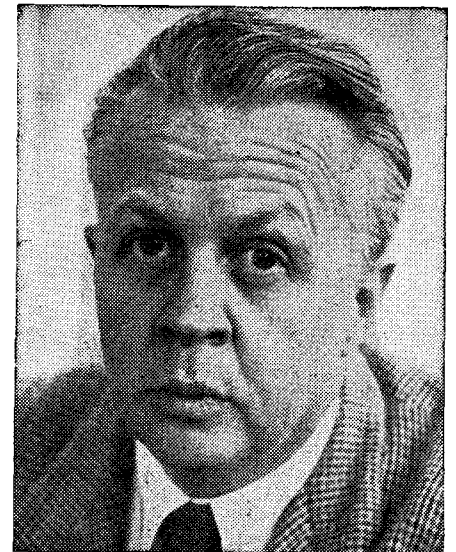
THE NICE AMERICAN. By Gerald Sykes. New York: Creative Age Press. 310 pp. \$3.

By JOHN BROOKS

THE "nice American" of Mr. Sykes's first novel is an engineer by profession, a Southerner by birth, a liberal by temperament, a photographer by avocation, and a temporary colonel by Act of Congress. He is stationed in Algiers in 1945, dividing his time between administering the American military post there and trying to make up his mind between his American ex-wife and his present girl, the wife of a French official. He earns the epithet "nice" from the French and Arabs because his interests extend beyond Coca-Cola and washing machines, his reading beyond comic books—because, that is, he violates the local opinions about what an American ought to be.

The colonel, whose name is Harlan Childress, is first presented in a prologue in which the author optimistically remarks of his story that "nothing could have been more human . . . it was indeed a classic drama." There is little in what follows to justify these statements. The colonel dickers with an Arab who wants to get his son to America; he writes in his diary; he argues with a French intellectual; he takes a visiting isolationist Senator on a tour of the local red-light district and then defies the Senator's efforts to make political capital of some local riots. Meanwhile his ex-wife, Mollie, a Red Cross girl with political ambitions and a vast liking for having her own way—if she can only figure out what it is—arrives from Paris. Her arrival throws Harlan, a vacillating soul when it comes to women, into a frenzy of indecision as to whether he should remarry Mollie or leave her permanently for the French girl, Jeanne, a far more tractable and less ambitious sort of lady.

The long conversations between Harlan and certain Frenchmen, Englishmen, and Arabs, plus a dust-jacket quotation by Christopher Isherwood, would seem to indicate that Mr. Sykes to some extent intended his characters to be allegorical figures of their respective countries or at least to speak for the intelligent people of those countries. If such was the author's intent he has not achieved it very well, for the very successful yet sensitive and vulnerable Colonel Childress is scarcely characteristic of even intellectual Americans. More importantly, in spite of his colloquies with his local friends, the colonel's



—Hans Namuth.

Gerald Sykes—"enthusiastic commentator."

real concern is not his attitude toward the French, the English, or the world at large, but his attitude toward Mollie.

So what we have here after the unfortunate pretensions have been stripped away is neither a classic drama nor an international allegory but several extremely lively rounds in the battle of the sexes, with the city of Algiers serving as an exotic prize ring. The contestants are pretty evenly matched; Harlan, being a Southern gentleman, is hampered by a tendency to adhere to the Queensberry rules, while Mollie knows no rules whatsoever and is hampered only by the fact that she does not really quite want to win.

The first round begins right at the airport where Mollie arrives and continues in a jeep on the way to town. Subsequent rounds are contested in Harlan's bedroom at his seaside villa, on the beach, at a dinner he gives for the visiting Senator, and on a balcony overlooking the Mediterranean. The last round takes place at the airport again. Harlan is dreadfully damaged in some of these exchanges, as Mollie's punches draw the claret, but he always comes back fighting gamely. In fact, it is the great energy and variety of attack shown by both fighters that makes the encounter continuously interesting and never monotonous. Mr. Sykes serves as an enthusiastic and resourceful commentator. As to the eventual winner, probably no one needs to be told at this point; suffice to say that without much question the superior contestant emerges victoriously.

John Brooks, New Yorker staff member, is author of "The Big Wheel."