

Spanish Genius

"Spanish Stories and Tales," edited by Harriet de Onís (Alfred A. Knopf, 270 pp. \$3.95), brings together twenty-three fictional pieces, written in the Old World and the New, between the thirteenth century and the present.

By T. G. Bergin

THE TWENTY-THREE stories in Harriet de Onís's collection, "Spanish Stories and Tales," cover a wide range chronologically no less than geographically. The oldest tale (from the "Calila y Dimna") goes back to the times of Alfonso el Sabio, who lived some one hundred years before Chaucer, and the latest one, by the Argentine Eduardo Mallea, is of only last year; while on the geographical side, although the mother country is best represented (eleven stories), there are four entries from Argentina, and one each from Cuba, Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, Chile, and Uruguay.

It is interesting to note that of the tales printed in the last twenty years (I count seven such, though dates are not always given) all are Spanish-American rather than Spanish. This may give a somewhat false impression

of the vitality of the motherland—one may regret that such writers as Pérez de Ayala, Fernandez-Florez, and the unpredictable Ramón are unrepresented. But I am afraid I am falling into the old trap; a reviewer of any anthology is always tempted to revise the table of contents, which is certainly beside the point. *Callen barbaras si hablan cartas*—these are all fine stories.

In the arrangement of the items, chronology is deliberately flouted; the Cervantes entry, "The Call of the Blood," is preceded by the twentieth-century fable of the Argentine Borges and followed by the amusing allegory of Clarín (associated with "the generation of '98").

I don't quite understand the purpose of the arrangement of the tales; the abandonment of chronological order does of course have the effect, no doubt intended, of pointing up the eternal freshness of some of the old stories; and the mingling of the centuries leaves us with a final impression of certain constants in the Spanish mentality. The didactic urge is strong (see Don Juan Manuel's version of shrew-taming); there is a striving for the sententious, the oracular, and the universal (see not only Unamuno but the Mexican herdsmen of "Coyote 15"); and when realism breaks out it is likely to be brutal or violent (see "Ashes for the Wind," among others). Short stories of other nations show these qualities too, of course, but not I think in the same proportions. Conversely, Spanish has relatively little of the chatty anecdote tale of Sacchetti or Bandello or of the art for art's sake (sometimes sheer mischief) story that among the French is as old as "Aucassin and Nicolette" and as new at least as Guillaume Apollinaire and the Surrealists. The sobriety, the earnestness, and the soul-searching of the Spanish spirit come out clearly in this collection.

Space does not permit me to comment on individual items as I would like to. The reader completely unfamiliar with Spanish prose will learn from the selections here why certain names such as Cervantes, Valle-Inclán, and Unamuno have won renown; readers well acquainted with the field may find some pleasant surprises in the contemporary offerings (notably Novás Calvo's grim tale of the cabbie caught in the Cuban revolution) and may feel reassured about the lasting vigor of the Spanish creative genius.

Harriet de Onís, as well as translating fifteen of the stories, provides a discreet introduction along historical lines, and an informative paragraph about each of the entries.



—Van Ammon.

Doris Betts—"strong, sensitive."

A Fine Debut

"The Gentle Insurrection," by Doris Betts (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 274 pp. \$3.50), is a collection of short pieces, mostly on Southern themes, written while the author was an undergraduate at the Women's College of the University of North Carolina.

By Evelyn Eaton

IT IS often interesting, sometimes moving, and once in too great a while unexpectedly and satisfactorily exciting, to read the first published work of a new "serious" young writer, using the French word *sérieux*, which does not preclude comedy, but is simply the word of tribute that nation of individual critics and craftsmen chooses to give to the man or woman presenting a well-finished, properly polished piece of work to an equally "serious" public. Doris Betts's "The Gentle Insurrection" is such an occasion for excitement.

Here we have twelve fine stories, free from banality of thought and commonplace theme, exploring deep dimensions of experience with a mature authority. Mrs. Betts excels in the creation of charged atmospheres, subtle tensions, and unexpressed anxieties between well-meaning people who would like to understand one another, but are hopelessly divided by our human isolation.

Her work passes one of the tests

FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT NO. 577

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 577 will be found in the next issue.

VWQUDFGX F KR PEF

PEKW X MQO VWQU HWG

EQU JHW MQO VWQU

CQLF PEHW MQO GQ VWQU.

—XFLPLOGF RPFKW.

Answer to No. 576

The pleasantness of an idea is no evidence for its truth, nor vice versa.—J. B. S. Haldane.

of the greatest writing, which is that more shall assail the reader than is written on the page. Her first story, "The Sympathetic Visitor," is an example of power of evocation and communication of a mood every white woman living in the South will recognize, here superbly and economically conveyed. The tragedy of Nettie Sue, whose brother, driven desperate by the pressures of drab life, and by the war, to murder his mother and run amok through a terrorized town, is matched by the tragedy of Miss Ward, who, accepting and resenting guilty responsibility, can find only platitudes to say to Nettie Sue. "Yes," said Miss Ward. Now the tiredness was all over her, hanging on her limbs the way moss hangs on trees in a swamp; she felt herself slumping, flattening. "Yes, we were all scared uptown, too."

"Child So Fair" is another example of Mrs. Betts's strong, sensitive power of evocation. We enter fully into several lives in a short eight pages: "Will Franklin took Thea to wife when she was about sixteen, and they fell to displeasure right away. Thea didn't hold with forgiving too ready and Will didn't care if she did

or neither, so it went poorly for them. Thea was the only one of them all ever coming home; the rest stuck it out in quietness."

The weakest story in the book is the most ambitious, "Serpents and Doves," an excursion into Stephen Vincent Benét's world of dialogue with the devil, which doesn't quite come off, though it has its good moments before we encounter the devil.

"The Gentle Insurrection," from which the collection takes its title, was printed in *Coraddi*, at the Women's College of the University of North Carolina, as was "The Sword"; "The Sympathetic Visitor" and "Mr. Shawn and Father Scott" won prizes and publication in *Mademoiselle*. The collection received the \$2,000 award in the first Putnam-University of North Carolina Prize contest. After such a promising debut in the world of letters, it will be interesting to watch the development of this writer's work. What, for instance, will she give us, when she has emerged from the generous pessimism of indignant youth, and, in the words of Dr. Johnson's would-be philosopher, "cheerfulness breaks in"? It could be a great book.

Dirty-Deal World

"Happy New Year, Kamerades!"
by Robert James Collas Lowry
(Doubleday. 256 pp. \$3.50), is a collection of short stories about a variety of themes, the most effective of which deal with the Army in wartime.

By Charles Lee

AT HIS best Robert James Collas Lowry is a powerful writer, a maker of somber spells who achieves impact even when he does not win intellectual assent to his philosophy of despair. But Mr. Lowry is not always at his best, as he makes too clear in his new collection of short stories, "Happy New Year, Kamerades!" a display of very uneven exhibits. Finished landscapes take the same spotlight with experimental doodlings, the mature statement with sophomoric sophistication. One wishes he had not such a preservative esteem for all of his creations.

Mr. Lowry is especially dimensional and dramatic in his rendering of the "dirty-deal world" of war. Here the mobilization of man's most uncharitable impulses is emphatically visible; the reduction makes him transparently lower than the angels; he can be seen through without his little touch of radiance—and the revelation is satanically ugly. If Lowry seems to simplify, so, too, does the Army. The difficulty is that his bristling simplifications are always in one direction, as if men are never dignified but only disillusioned by disaster; yet God, as someone has said, has spoken from the mouths of cannon as well as from the mouths of saints.

"Casualty," the longest story in the book, reveals the appalling pettiness of life in an Air Corps camp near San Cialo, Italy, during the fifth winter of the war. The men are unhappy pawns in the officers' constant efforts to manipulate advancement for themselves; the Red Cross girls are only too willing to provide comforts beyond the call of doughnuts and coffee. Equally cynical are two other war stories, "The Defense in University City," a bitter slice of nihilism relating to the Spanish Civil War, and "Happy New Year, Kamerades!" a rough picture of sadism on the part of a group of American infantrymen desperately trying to get a kick out of celebrating New Year's Eve in an unobliging Rome.

Of the other eight pieces in the book, one is orthodox in treatment and subject, three are experimental,

(Continued on page 35)



Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich

TELL IT TO THE BIRDS

Beatrice S. Firestone of Cincinnati, Ohio, submits ten poetical passages in which birds are named or apostrophized without being named. You are asked to identify the birds, the poems, and the authors. If, of the thirty clutches of information sought, you achieve fewer than twenty, you are a sitting duck; if from twenty-one to thirty, a wise old owl; if thirty-one or better, stick a feather in your cap. Answers on page 18.

1. Thou was not born for death, immortal bird,
No hungry generations tread thee down.
2. A ----- in a cage.
Puts all heaven in a rage.
3. Hail to thee, blithe spirit,
Bird thou never wert.
4. The moan of ----- in immemorial elms.
The murmur of innumerable bees.
5. The wild ----- to the windswept sky,
The deer to the wholesome mold,
And the heart of a man to the heart of a maid,
As it was in the days of old.
6. The ----- on still St. Mary's Lake
Float double, ---- and shadow.
7. Of all the birds that sing and fly
Between the housetops and the sky
The muddy ----- mean and small
I like by far the best of all.
8. So the struck -----, stretched upon the plain
No more through rolling clouds to soar again
Viewed his own feather on the fatal dart,
And winged the shaft that quivered in his heart.
9. The ----- carries the sky on his back.
10. ----- in the grass alas.