

FICTION

Complexities in a Country House

"The Hidden River," by Storm Jameson (Harper, 244 pp. \$3), recounts what occurred when a group of people who had known each other in various guises in Occupied France meet again in a country house on the Loire.

By Howard Mumford Jones

THE HIDDEN RIVER" is the seventeenth novel and twentieth book by an author distinguished for craftsmanship, intelligence, and readability. One wonders, therefore, why so able a novelist does not draw more applause from the pontifical critics who robe authors for immortality. Is it that they are blind to Storm Jameson's literary virtue, or is there some notable defect in her work that keeps her out of the company of the great, and is there a certain naivete in our critical canons, which seem to make places for "literature" and for sub-literary work, but make no place for the intelligent laborer in the honorable craft of commercial fiction? I do not know the answer to these questions, but I do know that "The Hidden River" seems to raise them.

The fable, first. Adam Hartley, a British agent during World War II, returns to the country home of Jean Monnerie, with which he had had important connections as part of the French underground. An uncle, an aged collaborator, returns from prison to die in the house; but not before the detestation of Mme. Regnier for him and all his works is made evident.

This detestation arises from her intense grief over the torture and death of her son, betrayed to the Nazis and the Vichy Government. There is in the house an engaging young man, light-hearted and irresponsible, François, whom Adam recollects as being in places he should not have been and in contact with persons he should not have known. Bit by bit, irresistibly, the truth comes out: the beloved son of Mme. Regnier had been betrayed by this same François. François is doomed to death by a just and implacable older brother, Jean Monnerie; Adam falls in love with Jean's betrothed, Elizabeth, and at the end of the tale Mme. Regnier, her sense of justice satisfied or her vengeance fulfilled (as one prefers), is left alone, erect and triumphant in the charming country house on the banks of the Loire.

With the exception of François, who seems to me too much the stock figure of the charming victim, all these personages are seen in the round, and I am prepared to accept them—and to accept François, for that matter, so that the story may proceed. The conversations are intelligent, and the two deaths—that of the crippled uncle and that of François—are, in pleasing contrast to the obsession with death among our own novelists, off-stage and without either melodrama or rhetoric. Adam Hartley will, at least, "do," and I am even prepared to believe that the emotional self-tortures of Adam, Elizabeth, and Jean will result in a cleanly marriage between Adam and Elizabeth. In sum, the



THE AUTHOR: Beyond, as the saying goes, peradventure, Mrs. Margaret Storm Jameson Chapman, a prolific Yorkshirewoman who has utilized the last three decades to write twenty or so books, is the most outspoken Pittsburghophile on either side of the Atlantic, and possibly in Pittsburgh. "I had the supreme good luck to spend 1948-1949 there," she said longingly in London the other day, "and I would like to be in Pittsburgh at this minute, in the street car going down Fifth Avenue or Forbes Street to the center of the city, that Golden Triangle of rich firms, and on to the Point where two grand rivers become a grander one, the Ohio." She stopped for a moment of recall. "I am sorry for this digression," she went on (she had been talking about her writing). "I've got into the habit of praising Pittsburgh to Americans because I find you don't appreciate it as you should. It is really a most beautiful city." The Chapmans—Guy Patterson Chapman, her husband, a retired professor of modern history at Leeds University—came here in 1948 to lecture at the University of Pittsburgh. Neither the academic nor industrial smoke interrupted her writing, to which she has been devoted unflinchingly ever since her school days—first at Leeds, and later at University College, London. Writing has never been easy for her. "I don't much like it," she said, noting that her new novel was rewritten three times. Regardless, Miss Jameson—she was once described as a "typical Yorkshirewoman, stubborn, rather secretive and reticent, with a hot temper, bulldog persistence, and immense vitality"—holds the distinction of being the first woman ever elected president of the English PEN Club, a post she held between 1938 and 1945. John Galsworthy and H. G. Wells were among her predecessors. Another post she once held was writer-delegate to the UNESCO Congress on the Arts in Venice, in 1952. She recently returned to London after a visit to Cyprus to see her son, the senior pilot of a charter firm there, and she is now trying to find an excuse to visit the States. "I am homesick for Pittsburgh," she sighed. —BERNARD KALE.



—Jacket by Leo Manso, for "The Hidden River."

"... bit by bit, irresistibly, the truth comes out."

book is so good I kept wishing it were better, and it is in the quality of its possible betterment that the riddle of Storm Jameson's talent lies.

I hazard the guess that what just prevents "The Hidden River" from achieving unquestioned place is a kind of compression, a kind of haste. In less than 250 pages we are to achieve setting, we are to move forward events in present time (for example, the Jean-Elizabeth-Adam love story), we are to acquire insight into the complexities of a complex family history, and we are also simultaneously to invoke the atmosphere of Vichy France and to unravel a kind of mystery story. That all this is kept clear is a tribute to Storm Jameson's expertise. The difficulty lies in the foreshortening of time. The fable needs to be stretched out like that of "The Portrait of a Lady," whereas it is condensed like that of "The Turn of the Screw." Complexities of plot sufficient for the one sort of novel are crowded into space better fitted for a simpler tale.

This foreshortening means that throughout the 244 pages, except for the very opening, everything is kept at constant tension, a tension that makes for readability but that slowly—oh, very slowly!—destroys belief. And belief is needed in the case of the character who is the very center of the fable—that is, François. We see him only in retrospection and in the moment of exposure; and the unfortunate result is that we do not see his motives actively at work as we see the motives of his brother, or of Adam, or of Mme. Regnier. In sum, the very heart of the novel is the complicated character of this boy, but we are not brought face to face with the complication, we do not grow with him, we do not see him (as James or Trollope or George Eliot would have seen him) making his first step in the wrong direction, resenting slights, accepting affection. Here it is that haste, it seems to me, betrays an able writer. Perhaps it is this anxiety to get the story done that prevents it from being the mature work of art it promised to be.

SOLUTION OF LAST WEEK'S
KINGSLEY DOUBLE-CROSTIC (No. 1096)

[LADY] MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU:

LETTERS

People are never so near playing the fool as when they think themselves wise. They lay aside that distrust which is the surest guard against indiscretion, and venture on many steps they would have trembled at, at fifteen.

Workhorse of the Fleets

"The Good Shepherd," by C. S. Forester (Little, Brown. 310 pp. \$3.95), tells of Commander George Krause and his feat in convoying thirty-seven merchant ships through a U-boat pack during World War II. Here it is reviewed by Walter Karig, editor and co-author of the Navy's six-volume history, "Battle Report."

By Walter Karig

JUST ten years ago *The Saturday Review* hailed Captain Frederick J. Bell's "Condition Red" as the first book to deal with the destroyers, those "Saturday's children of war." Quickly in the wake of Captain Bell's story came squadrons of destroyer narratives: Captain L. A. Abercrombie's "My Life to the Destroyer," James Horan's "Action Tonight," Richard Shafter's "Destroyers in Action" to name a few in the van. Much later came the works of fiction about the "small boys" of the fleet, prominently Nicholas Monsarrat's "Cruel Sea" and Herman Wouk's "Caine Mutiny."

Cecil Forester knew, therefore, that he was laying a course through crowded waters when he wrote "The Good Shepherd." Literarily, that requires more courage and navigational skill than to head into unexplored seas. Forester's new novel demonstrates that he had both.

As a novel "The Good Shepherd," for all its staccato style, is more subtly developed than either of its two famous fictional predecessors. All men go to sea troubled by the memory, bitter or sweet, of some woman. Commander George Krause, rugged hero of the tale, was so wedded to the Navy that he lost the love of his mortal wife, a tragedy for which he sometimes reproaches himself, but not too harshly. He is a religious man, given to prayer; a parson's son in whose soul a sense of duty was burned deeply, and there was no doubt in his Lutheran mind where the greater duty lay, quarterdeck or conjugal bed.

Forester does not cause his character's private life to detract from the greater trials of Krause's body and soul as he herds his convoy of thirty-seven smoky, poky merchant ships through an encircling U-boat wolf pack, with only four destroyers for the fight.



—Jacket by R. A. Genders for the book.

"... left rudder! Steady as you go."

The gaunt realism with which that contest is told is what makes the book a new great narrative of the sea. Forester does not deign to be indulgent with his landlubber readers. Time cannot be taken out in the middle of a desperate battle to explain what is meant by such dialogue as "I'll come in on course one two zero. Over. Left smartly to course one two zero," and "Right rudder handsomely. . . . Meet her! Left rudder! Steady as you go." Persons not familiar with the esoterica of maneuvering commands may find the pages of such talk both bewildering and monotonous at first, but understanding is not long delayed that here is a very expert description of a fighting ship groping blindly through heaving seas for a cunning and vicious killer. To take time out to explain that "handsomely" is Navy language for "carefully, deliberately" would be to rob the story—and the reader—of its prime qualities of urgency and suspense.

Forester's ship handling and the nautical terminology he employs as orders are given and received are technically flawless. Probably it is for such contributions that the author gives thanks to Vice Admiral Ralph Christie and Commander J. D. P. Hodapp in front of the book. Horatio Hornblower would not be able to understand.

The United States Navy and Her Majesty's as well have cause to thank Cecil Forester for a most telling tribute to the workhorses of the fleets.