

The Lusty Immortal

"Wine of Life," by Charles Gorham (Dial Press. 598 pp. \$4.95), is a biographical novel about Honoré de Balzac by an author who first assayed this form in *"The Gold of Their Bodies,"* whose subject was Gauguin. Frances Winwar, who reviews the Gorham novel, is the author of *"Oscar Wilde and the Yellow Nineties."*

By Frances Winwar

A FICTIONAL narrative on the life of a well-known personage and one who was alive only yesterday in point of time, is a difficult challenge, but Charles Gorham has met it valiantly in his *"Wine of Life,"* a novel about Honoré de Balzac. It is a large book—large and lusty as the protagonist himself, who storms through it with the impetus of a gale. From the moment of his birth to a doting father and a mother who rejected him even before he saw the light, to his burial as plain Balzac—the title of his immortality—his impetuous, creative, romantic, triumphant, and tragic life unreels with the speed and vividness of a Grade A Technicolor, supercolossal film. It is a portrayal that Balzac would have relished and found true.

Mr. Gorham has thoroughly investigated his sources: the Balzac-Hanska correspondence, a mine-yielding bonanza on every page, as well as Balzac's *"Louis Lambert,"* incorporating his inhuman punishment at the Jesuit college, and the *"Duchess of Langeais,"* his revenge on the frigid, calculating Duchesse de Cas-



—Bettmann.

Honoré de Balzac—"... Gargantuan."

tries, who used him for her political purposes. These and other pieces of thinly disguised reality, in addition to the biographies that have accumulated through the years, add to the authenticity of the portrait.

Balzac's life was as Gargantuan as his capacity for work and adventure. A son of Touraine, like Rabelais, he early identified himself with the lusty master, and his *"Droll Stories"* is a tribute to his spirit. But he was uniquely Balzac in his vast productivity that embraced all his life and which he rightly called *"The Human Comedy."*

It is one of the merits of *"Wine of Life"* that the preposterous dandy with his bizarre costumes and jewel-studded cane, who dearly loved having titled mistresses, loses none of his essential greatness when, in the austerity of his cell-like workroom, in his white Carmelite gown, he recreated the transitory and made it immortal.

Balzac the lover looms large, and rightly, for he had the potency of a proliferating Zeus. Back of his quest—and this Mr. Gorham indicates without stressing—lay his desire for the love his mother never gave. It was natural, then, that he should have found it in Madame de Berny, mother, mistress, and muse. This difficult relationship Mr. Gorham handles delicately, sympathetically, almost with the reverence which Balzac had throughout his life for his first Egeria. Others followed: the wise friend, Zulma Carraud; the shoddy Napoleonic Duchesse d'Abrantès; the calculating de Castries, the countless adventures of a night.

Then came his Nemesis, the Polish Countess Evelina de Hanska. He, the naïve and infatuated, called her his *"wife of love."* In life the Countess de Hanska had few champions and many detractors. Mr. Gorham belongs to the latter camp. From the moment she appears, tragedy casts its shadow upon Balzac, then in the glory of his fame and fortune. With remarkable objectivity Mr. Gorham pursues this romance of almost two decades through its phases of attraction and repulsion to its powerful, cruelly sardonic close as Balzac lay dying. All told, *"Wine of Life"* is absorbing, vivacious and, like life itself, has its share of pity and terror.



—Edith Visser.

Maria Dermoût—"... warm heart."

The Spice Islands

"The Ten Thousand Things," by Maria Dermoût (translated by Hans Koningsberger; Simon & Schuster. 244 pp. \$3.75), is an exotic tale about life in the Moluccas. It is reviewed for us by Hendrik de Leeuw, author of *"Crossroads of the Java Sea"* and, most recently, *"Woman, The Dominant Sex."*

By Hendrik de Leeuw

THIS is the story about a little-known people in a less-known section of the fabulous Moluccas, or Spice Islands, in what used to be the Dutch East Indies. It is the work of an author who, with an eye for detail, a warm heart for humanity, and a capacity for translating prose into poetry, has turned out a highly readable and informative story, in which with telling selectivity life in these colorful islands is revealed.

The author is Maria Dermoût, born in Java of a Dutch colonial family who, to quote the publisher's biography, following her marriage at age eighteen, lived for twenty-seven years all over the Archipelago.

The title of this book, *"The Ten Thousand Things,"* derives from a statement by Ts'en Shen: "When the ten thousand things have been seen in their unity, we return to the beginning and remain where we have always been."

The locale of her story is a spice garden on one of the Moluccas, an area made famous by the seventeenth-century botanist George Everard Rumph, better known as Rumphius,

whose name not only bobs up throughout the book's pages, but to whom the world is indebted for the first description of the clove tree, and for two monumental works: "The Book of Curiosities" and the "Book of Herbs," published in 1705 and 1741 respectively.

The central character of this work is Felicia, who, born on one of these enchanting islands, was taken away as a child to lead a wandering life in the fashionable resorts of Europe, to marry eventually and return with her son to the land of her birth.

Conjuring up mental pictures of colonials, soldiers, scholars, sultans, fishermen, and witch doctors with almost radarlike sensitivity, Mrs. Dermout has divided her book into four parts: "The Island," "At the Inner Bay," "At the Outer Bay," and "The Island."

Although the focus of her story is on Felicia—with scarcely any detail of the earlier history of the place and the other *dramatis personae* who people the pages left undescribed—the narrative in essence becomes a warm and satisfying one. The background, replete with a wealth of descriptive vignettes, is extraordinarily well done. However, the book can barely be said to have a definite plot. The author moves with extreme grace and dignity in a *milieu* that, in itself, is enough to make the story almost achingly alive. Due to its striking simplicity, it is somewhat hard to explain what makes this book so exceptionally fascinating. It may be because it has maturity, sureness, and poise, or because it reveals an intimate comprehension of occidental and oriental minds and people, and finally because it is a work unspoiled by clichés of trickery and artifice.

Mr. Hans Koningsberger, Dutch writer and journalist, born in Amsterdam, and here since 1952, has done a highly workmanlike job of translating the book from the original Dutch, which I have read, even though in spots the narration is somewhat chatty and halting. All in all, "The Ten Thousand Things" is an enchanting story, filled with incident and color, and set against a mysterious background, in which the reader may become lost in an entirely different sphere, undisturbed by the cosmic reflections that hound one in the rest of the world.

Patrician Plebeian

"The Hireling," by L. P. Hartley (Rinehart, 272 pp. \$3.50), is about a cynical cabbie and a wistful, titled widow.

By Walter Havighurst

IN HIS new novel, "The Hireling," L. P. Hartley has focused his amused, detached, and patient observation upon a man whom a less discerning writer would overlook. After the war Stephen Leadbitter had returned to London with the instincts of a stalker. Though circumstance made him a hireling, he was individualistic, risk-taking, a man against the world.

Leadbitter was a bundle of contradictions. Crafty, shrewd, opportunistic, he carried an unsuspected honesty beneath a fabric of falsehoods. The driver of a car-for-hire, he was by nature independent, even overbearing. He was a menial who scorned menials: "If the material was plebeian, it had a patrician cut." He was armored and yet vulnerable, and while hiring out to a gentle, guileless young widow he dealt himself a mortal wound.

Leadbitter had a need of hostility; he thrived on it. He regarded his customers as enemies, until he encountered Lady Franklin. Beautiful, wealthy, and bereaved, she did not qualify as an enemy, yet she could be a victim. She had turned to Leadbitter when a psychiatrist told her she must become aware of lives unlike her own. She was using him as therapy while he used her as a soft touch.

What keeps this novel from becoming a tale like "Lady Chatterley's Lover" is Mr. Hartley's austerity and his patient interest in slowly turning facets of character. Lady Franklin was used to seeing what she wanted to see; Leadbitter was an opportunist, impervious to promptings of sentiment or conscience. Both were in flight from emotions, even while they became aware of the threat and promise of life. What began as a brush of diverse natures grew into an implicit alliance. Yet they could not surmount the barriers. They talked of the passing of distinctions, but Lady Franklin went home to Belgrave

Square and Leadbitter to Civvy Street. Leadbitter could save her from an unworthy suitor, but he could not save the two of them for each other.

In the background of the novel is an awareness of human separation. Lady Franklin's favorite drives led to Canterbury and Winchester, and in time stalker Leadbitter saw that cathedrals were a collective effort, impossible in the modern world. "Most art is the work of individuals, and often of individuals at odds with their lot: it's the fruit of loneliness and separation. The cathedrals were a collective effort, a family affair." Though he could not have said it, he could see what Lady Franklin meant.

More rigid and restricted than his earlier "The Go-Between" and "A Perfect Woman," Mr. Hartley's new novel has a quiet irony that finds both the cynical soldier and the wistful widow incapable of denying or asserting the emotions which might save them.

THE COOL CROWD: A *klatch* of neo-bohemians who inhabit Jack Kerouac's latest published novel "The Subterraneans" (Grove Press, \$3.50; paper \$1.45), are, in the words of their Boswell, "intellectual as hell and know all about Pound . . ." Besides being hip to the esthetic, these young Frisco sophisticates dig bop, take tea, and see plenty. And when not on junk, benny, or Napa Burgundy, they are working at becoming big writers. This novel (which by its lack of finesse and humor would seem to antedate "On the Road") is a Henry Millerish series of divagations on the theme of a subterranean love affair between Leo Percepied, "a great great writer" with one published novel, and Mardou Fox, a beautiful Negro girl undergoing psychiatric treatment. Percepied is not the best medicine for Mardou, since he flips with regularity, and eventually she leaves him for a less complicated titan named Yuri.

In the exciting "On the Road" the footloose hero says of a traveling companion: "I kind of liked him; not because he was a good sort . . . but because he was enthusiastic about things." So it is with Mr. Kerouac. His wide-eyed (and sometimes wild-eyed) enthusiasm, together with his ability to crystallize it in arresting imagery is what gave his last novel its unusual vitality. But while in "On the Road" Mr. Kerouac was lavishing his sense of discovery on a kaleidoscope of transcontinental vignettes—in "The Subterraneans" he is stalled at the end of the line, and the cool crowd is just too insubstantial to be the sole focus of the author's romantic zeal.

—MARTIN LEVIN.

