

A Bit of Italy Down East

"The Little Conquerors," by Ann Abelson (Random House. 375 pp. \$4.95), reveals the struggles of a modest Italian family in a town not unlike the author's own New Haven. Sergio Pacifici, associate professor of Italian at Yale, has translated (with Thomas G. Bergin) Salvatore Quasimodo's critical essays, slated for publication next year.

By Sergio Pacifici

ANN ABELSON has written an unusually absorbing story about the fortunes and misfortunes of an Italo-American family trying to make good—socially, economically, and politically—in a conservative New England town. Her novel, "The Little Conquerors," spans the years 1938 to 1956 and gives a vivid account of the daily struggles of the Giordanos trying to overcome the prejudices of a society whose traditions they only dimly understand.

The Giordanos prove to be a fascinating and representative lot. There is Vince, the mastermind, a clever lawyer with unrealized political ambitions who adroitly influences the family's decisions to suit his own interests. There is Mike, the would-be painter, married to a waitress, Rita, who becomes a successful restauratrice and who is instrumental in driving her husband to attempt suicide when he realizes that he is a failure. Then there is John, the rebel who goes to war and afterwards to college, marries Hilda, the daughter of a German refugee, and ends up teaching in a college stifled by politicking and conformity (a situation, I hasten to add, not at all uncommon). Finally, there are the daughters, Connie, Tess, and ambitious little Linda, the apple of her mother's eye, who marries, of all people, the town's business tycoon, Vito Marcotti. Over them all stands the mother, Annunziata, a thoroughly convincing and masterful creation who, through dogged determination and traditional authority, controls her children's lives and remains the constant point of reference throughout the story. Last, but not least, there is the "small talk" of lasagne, cutlets, and tomato sauce, along with concern for the future, the neighbors and the children—

who eventually become the "new" rebels.

Perhaps not many Italo-Americans will like this book: it is a candid, almost brutally frank depiction of the many failures of the Italian immigrant, and we live in an age when sincerity is less than fully appreciated. During the wedding reception given by Vito Marcotti, whose daughter has married an Italian *marchese* (a seedy character it turns out), the author remarks, through Mike:

An unsavory lot . . . a most unappetizing lot. . . . No patrons of the arts and letters among them. No philanthropists. . . . They didn't read. They didn't listen. Art was a funny word, humanity a big one. They just made money and spent some of it, gorging themselves on the evidence.

These remarks are disturbing because they are, unfortunately, all too true, and the average person is frightened by the prospect of confronting the truth. Yet Ann Abelson is right indeed in pointing out not only the inadequacies of Italo-Americans, but how they have compensated for their shortcomings (don't we all?) with a continuous defensiveness, an unquenchable thirst for economic security, and a clinging to useless traditions that have little meaning in today's world. By the same token, I wish she had told us something more of the suffering, the humiliations, the exploitations to which the Giordanos, and with them all minority groups, must have been subjected in free, fair, and democratic America. But perhaps Miss Abelson, whose gifts as a novelist are unquestionable and whose insights uncontested, will give us such a story in the future.

When and if that book is published, I should very much like to read it: I am certain that it will once again tell me a great deal about the Italo-Americans, as well as that intriguing creature called Man.



Your Literary I.Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich

"SING TO THE LORD A JOYFUL SONG."

The names of many distinguished composers are to be found on the roster of hymnologists along with those of the professionals who devoted their talents to sacred music more or less exclusively. Donald G. Smith of Louisville, Kentucky, submits twenty names taken from both groups and asks you to assign to them the hymns which are first-lined in Column One. Choir practice will be held on page 62.

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| 1. A mighty fortress is our God | () Ludwig van Beethoven |
| 2. Be still, my soul, the Lord is on thy side | () William B. Bradbury |
| 3. Come, thou Almighty King | () William C. Doane |
| 4. Glorious things of Thee are spoken | () John S. Dykes |
| 5. Hark, the herald angels sing | () Felice de Giardini |
| 6. Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty | () Louis M. Gottschalk |
| 7. Holy Spirit, truth divine | () Franz Gruber |
| 8. I am Thine, O Lord, I have heard Thy voice | () George Frederic Handel |
| 9. Jesus, I my cross have taken | () Thomas S. Hastings |
| 10. Joy to the world, the Lord is come | () Franz Joseph Haydn |
| 11. Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee | () Martin Luther |
| 12. Just as I am, without one plea | () Lowell Mason |
| 13. My faith looks up to Thee | () Felix Mendelssohn |
| 14. My Jesus, as Thou wilt | () Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart |
| 15. Onward, Christian soldiers | () Giovanni Palestrina |
| 16. Rock of Ages, cleft for me | () Ira D. Sankey |
| 17. Silent night, holy night | () Jan Sibelius |
| 18. Stand up, stand up for Jesus | () Sir Arthur Sullivan |
| 19. The strife is o'er, the battle won | () George Webb |
| 20. There were ninety and nine that safely lay | () Karl Maria von Weber |

The Fascination of Horror

"The Necklace of Kali," by Robert Towers (Harcourt, Brace. 343 pp. \$4.95), depicts the experiences of a young American as he travels through the strange, often disturbing world of modern India. Hope Hale contributes fiction to *The New Yorker* and *Town and Country*.

By Hope Hale

LIKE the author, John Wickham was an American vice consul in Calcutta during the turbulent years just after World War II. Such an atmosphere and locale can lead Westerners to discover unguessed and often devastating mysteries within themselves.

Wickham has been carrying on what has seemed a convenient and noncommittal love affair with a slightly older American woman, a Southerner working for a British firm. But after a nightmare siege of dengue fever, he looks deeper.

Poor Dorothy! [he muses]. My God, how little our lives have to do with what we want—or think we want! I saw Dorothy now plunging like some distracted mare toward a cliff. . . . What drove her? What drove me? I had a crazy vision of some dark rider—a rider who didn't straddle the back but crouched within, black and very powerful but unable to see, lashing and spurring the poor beast from within.

John loses Dorothy when his need to explore larger mysteries lures him to Benares with his friend Martin, a British economist devoted to India's future. "I embrace the darkness," shouts this dedicated public servant during a long evening of drink and talk. "Kali or Durga or whatever you want to call the black goddess . . . never had a more ecstatic worshipper than I. I seek the darkness with all the fervor of a bridegroom! I drink her health!"

John feels a shocked sympathy. Visiting the shrine of Kali with Martin, he knows fascination as well as horror when he looks at the necklace of human skulls and speculates on the strange religion that can glorify love and hate, creation and destruction.

Returning to Calcutta, John begins life with Julia, a pretty, girlish secretary who seems refreshingly uncomplicated. But she has problems, too—mystifying problems which threaten the happiness that seems within their reach on an idyllic, premarital honeymoon in the mountain paradise of Darjeeling. Neither John nor, it seems, the author, knows the real source of Julia's unpredictable eruptions of panic. Similarly, Martin's deep inner conflicts remain a mystery to the end. Nor is it ever clear why Philip, a rich and ele-

gant young colleague, has to try with such extravagant desperation to escape his Jewish background.

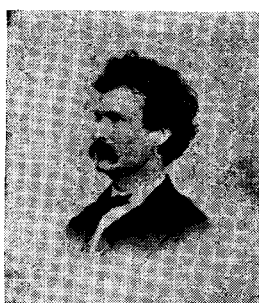
But if some of the psychological depths in this impressive first novel remain clouded, it presents India in exciting, unforgettable detail. And Robert Towers respects the wide range of characters he makes us feel that we know: Indians from a maharajah to a humble and endearing chowkrah; foreigners from a twang-tongued Quaker idealist to the anachronistic Lady Maitland, who looks and acts like "a scalded, unhappy sow." If Towers's prose is not as nuanced as that of E. M. Forster, his John Wickham, on the other hand, is no Ugly American. Though limited to a young man's fairly brief experience of India, "The Necklace of Kali" is an intense and honest effort to come to terms with the diversities of today's world.

The Many Faces of Mark Twain

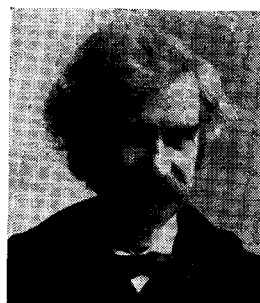
A uniquely American phenomenon, Mark Twain had a genius for life, a zest, and a versatility that seem to belong to legend. But their factual basis is carefully recorded in "Mark Twain Himself: A Pictorial Biography," produced by Milton Meltzer (Crowell, \$10). Culled from all of Twain's writings, the text is sharply illustrated by more than 600 pictures gathered from myriad sources. Here we see Mark Twain in a few of his diverse roles.



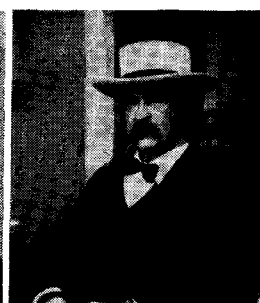
Printer's Devil.



Reporter-at-Large.



Poor Businessman.



Writer at Work.



Lakewood 1907: William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, George Harvey, H. M. Alden, David A. Munro, M. W. Hazeltine.