

Louis XIII and an Innocent Friend

"The Favourite," by **Françoise Mallet-Joris**, translated by **Herma Briffault** (Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 282 pp. \$4.50), tells of the victimization of the young *Louise de La Fayette* by a ruthless and atheistic abbé. Stanley Loomis is the author of a life of *du Barry*.

By STANLEY LOOMIS

THIS is an extraordinary book, a powerful, fascinating, and infinitely perceptive examination of that area of experience where the longings of the soul come into collision with secular ambition and the desires of the body. The theme is hardly a new one, but it is Madame Mallet-Joris's distinction that she has brought to it worldly wisdom and compassionate insight. "The Favourite" combines in its curious way

the spiritual admonitions of Aldous Huxley with the urbanity of the Duc de Saint Simon, and it is written in a style that at times is reminiscent of the novels of Ronald Firbank. It is one of those rare books that perhaps needs to be read twice, the first time in order to put the plot, which is a distraction, out of the way; the second time to fix one's attention on the novel's real interest, which is the complexity of the characters—each of whom is presented with an inner and outer appearance—and the intricate interplay between them.

In brief, the story is about the intrigues that surround Louise de La Fayette, who is the passionate friend, but not the mistress, of the young king, Louis XIII. These two lonely and wounded adolescents find in one another's company a poignant happiness, which almost breaks the spell of horror that has transfixed them to their child-

hood. It is not to the interest of the court's rival factions—one allied with Cardinal Richelieu, the other gathered about the rejected queen—that the pure, plain, and disinterested Louise should remain neutral in their quarrels. Indeed, neither side can believe that she is not secretly allied with the other. The Cardinal (and with what probity does the author depict this perennially fascinating character) is determined that she shall be removed from the court. To effect this he employs as his secret agent a certain Abbé N., who is insinuated into the position of confessor to the unsuspecting Louise. It is the Abbé's assignment to persuade her to take the veil and retire forever to a convent. His reward, if he succeeds, will be the Bishopric of Sens. A small masterpiece has been achieved in creating the Abbé N.—a ruthless, urbane atheist whose cold, penetrating intellect and prudently restrained Epicureanism have transcended the tragedy long ago enacted within his own soul:

He thought of the Cardinal's promises, of the calm and noble façade of the Bishop's palace at Sens. . . . He thought of the life that would unfold there, not full of vain agitation, but harmonious and as well ordered as a garden or a symphony. He thought



PARIS.
THE AUTHOR: "The Favourite" represents for Françoise Mallet-Joris both self-appraisal and a confession. For, like Louise de La Fayette, the novel's principal character, the thirty-one-

year-old writer discovered seven years ago the need for religion. She discussed it recently in her large but far from lavish apartment in Paris's Latin Quarter, where, dungaree-clad, she was painting the dining room floor. "At the age of twenty-four I had already been twice married and divorced. My first marriage was at the age of seventeen to a professor, and my second to a French diplomat. I was contemplating marriage for a third time, but I was afraid. I had believed that love could arrange everything, and now I was disillusioned. I had never had a religious force guiding me," she said. "My parents had no religion. As a child at school I

couldn't understand when other children spoke of God. And I had neither believed in nor found the need for God before."

Mme. Mallet-Joris stopped painting and sat down on the wooden bench in front of the dining table. "In fact," she continued, "I had been thinking about converting for a number of years, just as Louise, in the series of monologues, contemplated the retreat into the convent. But it took time to summon the courage. Conversion," she reflected wistfully, "is a decision, not a solution. It is the beginning of a search for truth. Religion demands that a person think constantly. I had more peace of mind before becoming a Catholic. But peace of mind offers little satisfaction in itself."

The loss-of-innocence theme, which is predominant in her earlier works, has solidified now, she said, into a search for knowledge. "I don't have many themes because I believe that when you have a very good one it's wise to remain with it and develop it."

"The Favourite," however, offers not only a change in setting from

the Flemish author's earlier novels—"The Illusionist," "House of Lies," "The Red Room," and "Café Celeste"—but also one of style. The monologues, stream-of-consciousness, photographic description might easily classify this book as a "new French novel." But, Mme. Mallet-Joris protested, "I have never read either Robbe-Grillet or Sarraute. I don't have the time with my work and four children [the oldest is thirteen, the youngest, one and a half]. In 'The Favourite' the period setting demanded a more classic form of language. And the plot—the examination of Louise's sincerity—required a change in sequence and form. I think that it's the result, not the form, that matters."

From the adjoining room a child cried, "Mama!" Mme. Mallet-Joris rose and smiled. "My first writings," she said, "were a series of poems, mainly about nature. They weren't very good because, naturally, I hadn't had enough experience. My husband Jacques, who's a painter, likes them though. He says that they make him think of his first sketches." —JERRY BAUER.

of the music he would listen to, the artists he would patronize, the plain and many rooms which he would inhabit, of the poems, sad yet piquant, that he would compose while the tall windows framed mellow sunlight.

The pilgrimage of Louise's soul across this desert of desire and ambition and her final awakening in the convent to her real self provide the underlying theme of the book. Against it the surface theme of the intriguing court is played with great subtlety and skill.

There is a seduction scene between the Abbé N. and a literary marquise that is worthy of the pen of Laclos ("He has a beautiful head of hair," the marquise writes in a letter describing the event, "dark and curly. One sees porters with hair like that. It's a gift from Heaven to the lower classes to console them for not being able to wear periwigs . . ."). There is another scene—between the Duchesse de la Bastie and her lover, a social-climbing

magistrate—that depicts in cruel words the weariness of appetites gratified and ambitions achieved. The Duchess is no longer able to find pleasure even in humiliating herself. "Blessed are the poor in spirit!" she suddenly cries out,

—and I'm beginning to believe it! To have a desire, a vice, a mania, a simple need—how that must fill up one's time! To want a title, a woman, money, really to want them to the extent of everything else. Blessed are the poor, for they think only of money; the poor in spirit because they are deceived; the just, because there is no justice; the hungry, because they have no bread. And cursed be to all of us who are rich, intelligent, titled, who have all the time in the world to become overwhelmed with our nullity—and to serve as sewers for the desires of a lowborn Magistrate.

This is not an easy book to read, nor will it be to everyone's taste, but it will leave the attentive reader in a thoughtful state of mind.

in contemporary fiction—and an uncomfortable one, too, for most of us—that one must virtually accept Richter's own simple and honorable approach to life if the story is to be enjoyed at its intended level. Indeed, it is hardly a novel in the conventional sense at all, but rather a loosely sketched portrait of the truly spiritual man; a man not without faults, who yet achieves a large measure of the grace of God. We see in him, perhaps, a reflection of the recent past, where such achievement was easier, rather than a guide to a future in which the conditions for moral survival are complex and sophisticated.

This "frontier quality" of the American past is the mine that Richter has worked in all his books, and while he has not glorified it beyond recognition, he does select those aspects which we like to think of as representing the best in our heritage. Simplicity and honor are certainly among them. In Donner, they must be lived if he himself is to live; and passed on if life itself is to go on. The author does not argue this point, but presents it through dozens of incidents that combine to make up the flesh and bone of his protagonist.

In the Rev. Donner's view, the letter killeth. There is more rejoicing (well, understanding at least) in a successful common-law marriage than in a blessed tie that fails to bind. He will say a prayer for a dying Catholic as quickly as for one of his Lutherans; ride horseback through rain to reach the afflicted; persuade the enraged murderer to drop his gun; suffer the insults of the Pharaical righteous; succor the downtrodden; reject the call to an affluent city parish. Was there ever such a man?

Mr. Richter convinces us that there was. Himself the son and grandson of clergymen, he has drawn upon the firsthand knowledge of two generations to authenticate his portrait. For once we accept the historical necessity for a Harry Donner, we accept Harry Donner himself—almost in spite of ourselves. A paean to goodness, this is a tender and beautiful book.

RENDEZVOUS ON A CONCRETE ISLAND:

"May one wish a nun good evening?" Antonio Mathis, accountant, blurts out as the streetcar rattles on through the streets of Turin. As narrator, Antonio has, with impressive ambivalence, prepared us, and himself, for the encounter. For weeks he and the young nun had been standing demurely at opposite ends of a concrete island waiting for a streetcar. That their delicate minuet—three yards apart—of approach and withdrawal was deliberate on her part as well as his and not mere happenstance became clear when Antonio applied the test of letting a streetcar pass

In the Footsteps of the Nazarene

"A Simple Honorable Man," by **Conrad Richter** (Knopf. 310 pp. \$4.50), depicts a truly spiritual minister serving the coal regions of Pennsylvania. Novelist David Dempsey frequently comments on contemporary American fiction.

By DAVID DEMPSEY

CONRAD RICHTER shares with William Faulkner the distinction of having won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for fiction. The two men are, of course, radical opposites in literary temperament, and their styles could hardly be more dissimilar. Richter's strength is a simplicity that disarms by its very boldness. In his prizewinning "The Waters of Kronos," he delved into the idea of time as a unifying factor in human consciousness, the element that cannot be recovered and yet is never lost. Daring in concept, the novel nevertheless verged on the sentimental, and hence became more personal than the mythic statement it might have been.

In his new book Richter writes about a Lutheran minister who comes about as close to following in the steps of Christ as a mortal can. At first impression, Harry Donner (who figured

also in "The Waters of Kronos") seems a little too simple and too honorable to be real. Taking his lead from St. Paul, he refuses to preach "the ministry of ease," and spends a lifetime serving the mountain people of eastern Pennsylvania. He dies poor, remembered by all and loved by many.

This is such an unfashionable notion



Conrad Richter—"a simplicity that disarms by its very boldness."