

Socks and Sardines for the POWs

"The Tightening String," by Ann Bridge (McGraw-Hill. 250 pp. \$4.95), views the anxious days and tensions of the Second World War through the eyes of a British diplomat's wife in Budapest. Aileen Pippett's comments on current fiction appear frequently in SR.

By AILEEN PIPPETT

THIS is a curious novel, realistic, straightforwardly told, dealing with memorable events of only twenty-odd years ago, yet strangely remote in general effect. The scene is Hungary; the Nazis are overrunning Europe, the British are forced off the Continent, and in Budapest the British Legation must hold on as long as possible in a country incapable of resisting the German might. The tension of those anxious days is sharply felt in the opening chapters, but after Dunkirk the sense of immediacy is lost. Our view of the situation is limited to that of the British women concerned; we are enclosed in a circle of the higher domesticity.

The main character, Rosina Eynsham, is married to the Counsellor at the Legation (as the author herself was at the time). Once she knows for certain that her son is back in England and her prospective son-in-law is one of the 40,000 prisoners, we settle down to the grim business of carrying on and preparing for the worst. Mrs. Eynsham has a strenuous life: she is hostess for the bachelor Minister at the splendid receptions; she takes her turn at monitoring the foreign news broadcasts; she has a flighty daughter and a sick, overworked husband to worry about; she must anticipate the need for hasty departure; above all, there is her self-imposed task of sending parcels to the British prisoners who are being held in Germany.

This project is described in great detail. Funds must be raised, supplies secured, transportation across frontiers arranged, reliable information obtained and records kept, wholesale lots repackaged for distribution to different camps. Mrs. Eynsham is indefatigable. She travels to Greece and Turkey to get sardines and socks, knitting wool, chocolate, cigarettes, blankets, warm

clothes and stout shoes, mouth organs, and innumerable things to keep the wretched men alive and sane. She haggles, coaxes, bullies, packs and re-packs, carries loads; nothing is too much. She does a superb housekeeping job on a colossal scale, and receives magnificent cooperation: not a faulty shipment, not a dishonest trader, not a man—from the Regent to the local carpenter—who refuses help. Her only trouble is with the British Red Cross bigwigs, who persist in thinking they know better than she does, and with the home government, which imposes strict credit control.

There are moments of relaxation on princely estates, though even here Nazi sympathizers and spies are up to no good. Apart from these base creatures, the Hunks—as they are affectionately known—are wonderful. So far as Mrs. Eynsham is concerned, everyone in those days was contented, the rich were generous, the poor were grateful, servants were devoted, shepherds sang and Gypsies danced. What a pity she has to flee from this idyllic land and that the author has to remind us in a Foreword that this is only fiction.

MIXED-UP MEDICS: At twenty-two, John Farris proved that he had the stamina and the narrative ability to turn out a novel. "Harrison High" concerned itself with high school football and high school passions, relatively safe material for a writer who could provide pace if not depth of character. With his second novel, "The Long Light of Dawn" (Putnam, \$4.95), the still-young Mr. Farris is in trouble. He has ignored his gift for narrative and concentrated on character. The result is a sluggish work filled with people who say they are in trouble and fumble around in the present, rehashing their troubles anytime one of them gets together with the hero-narrator. Behind each of them is a past filled with nothing but a young author saying to himself, "If poppa and momma were indifferent, the kids have to be mixed up and interesting." Readers of "The Long Light of Dawn" will find out how wrong this sort of thinking can be.

The cast of characters centers around the Arnett family. The lead is young Lee, floundering in med school, looking for purpose in life. Sister Vicky has three marriages behind her and

sulks whenever she appears. Brother Scott is a highly disturbed surgeon, with a pregnant wife disturbed by his disturbance. Father Arnett is loved by all save his family, and has had a love outside the family. Mother Arnett settled for doing good works early in the marriage game. Other major characters include Dr. Finch, an amalgam of Lew Ayres and Dr. Christian, who has been in the wings for years, passively loving Mother Arnett and offering advice to the Arnett boys; Bobby, another medical student, who is also seeking a meaning for life; and Clark Daly, a revivalist who offers a meaning for life.

Though incidents occur throughout, nothing really happens in the book. For hundreds of pages people get together and reveal the past in the bald-est chunks of exposition since "White Cargo" gave Tondeleyo to the world. What is established is that the Arnett family has been a long time decaying. Eventually, all this established decay leads to an attempted murder and a drowning, and after a mystical talk between the revivalist and the hero, the hero leaves home as all young heroes should.

There was a suspicion in "Harrison High," now confirmed with "The Long Light of Dawn," that John Farris wants to associate himself with the quality writers. Too little sex, too few gamy words, too little plot, and too much neurosis furnish the clues. It's a shame. He might make it as a popular novelist.

—HASKEL FRANKEL.

FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT NO. 985

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 985 will be found in the next issue.

SN G TGR DBBFZ LSZ

WMGF ZLXW, WLB OAMQE

OSQQ PBCW G FGWL WA

LSZ EAAM.

NMGRDQSR F. GECTZ.

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 984

We live under a government of men and morning newspapers.

—WENDELL PHILLIPS.

Pater Was a Bit Bizarre

***"Tales My Father Taught Me: An Evocation of Extravagant Episodes,"* by Osbert Sitwell** (Atlantic-Little, Brown. 202 pp. \$4.75), contains further anecdotes about the author's eccentric sire. Harry T. Moore, research professor at Southern Illinois University, recently edited *"The World of Lawrence Durrell"* and *"The Collected Letters of D. H. Lawrence."*

By HARRY T. MOORE

MONUMENTALLY eccentric in the grand English tradition, Sir George Sitwell is already amusingly known to readers of his son Osbert's five-volume autobiography, *"Left Hand, Right Hand."* But there was plenty left over, so here he is again, with his high-bridged nose and his golden moustache spiked upward, the key figure in a book that is at once entertaining and significant—entertaining because it presents a character of such attractive oddity, and significant because it does this expertly; Sir Osbert's quiet but subtly loaded style is just right for this kind of memoir, which is further important in that it gives us a wonderful piece of an irrevocable past.

The anecdotes about George Reresby Sitwell, for whom the Georgian Age might have been named rather than for the mild-mannered monarch he outlived by several years, are too numerous



Sir Osbert—a "subtly loaded style."

to repeat here, but summaries of a few of them will provide samples of the book. When Osbert Sitwell was on the Western front in the 1914-18 war, the father one morning rushed into the mother's room (as she later reported) and breathlessly said, "We may hear at any moment that Osbert's been killed, and the other dear boy will probably go too; in which case you will certainly pass away, and what I want to know is, would the money in your settlement be available for the sons of my second marriage?" During the same war—sitting at a tea party next to a woman who he didn't know was the mother of Rupert Brooke—Sir George, despite the kicks under the table, kept grumbling that everyone was foolishly overrating the verse of "that young man who died in the Dardanelles—I forget his name."

Once Sir George spoke ill of Robin Hood and his band, because they should have presented the money they had stolen to the rich, who alone knew how to spend it. Sir George hoped that his son would not take up with such a bad lot; as for Maid Marian, "There can be no doubt that she blackmailed Robin Hood." Asked how he had discovered this, Sir George gave his usual reply: *"We happen to know."*

And so it goes, through words and actions. Chronologically the book is scrambled, a series of loose sketches, and full understanding of it depends somewhat upon acquaintance with the earlier memoirs; yet there is much in the present volume that stands well by itself. George Reresby Sitwell behaved with the lack of self-consciousness of an authentically absurd figure, and, although he died only as recently as 1943, in his eighties, he seems to belong to a time much farther back, to the age of empire, when millions of sweating coolies (as we see it today) made his sheltered existence possible, with all its flourish of eccentricities. Whatever happens, let's hope that England will continue to turn out such juicy characters.

They don't all, of course, belong to the high social echelons. Sir George's butler, Henry Moat, reappears in the present volume, with his own weird sayings and behavior, and more of his flavorful letters. Another star in the cast is a Sitwell relative, Lord Henry, who serves tea rather than coffee be-



Dame Edith—never outshone by father.

cause tea stimulates gossip. He can give remarkable imitations of Disraeli. Lord Henry also appears as a composer, for he wrote the music to a sentimental song that is still with us: *"O Dry Those Tears."*

The settings are the familiar ones: The house at Scarborough, Yorkshire; the villa at Montegufoni, Italy, and the three-centuries-old mansion at Renishaw, Derbyshire (the book contains some charming photographs of the last two places). Renishaw recently appeared in a television interview with Sir Osbert, and has also been in the news lately because of an announcement by Sir Osbert's sister, Dame Edith Sitwell.

DAME Edith, a first-rate poet who has never let her father outshine her in the matter of eccentricity, says that her next book will attack D. H. Lawrence for supposedly having used Renishaw as the locale of *"Lady Chatterley's Lover."* But surely Lawrence, as in several of his other novels, took as his model for the Chatterley estate the Nottinghamshire country house known as Lamb Close. Dame Edith, seeing Lawrence peopling Renishaw with Sir Clifford and Lady Chatterley, to say nothing of their gamekeeper, somewhat resembles her father in the chapter of the present book to which Sir Osbert gives the Sherlock Holmesian title *"The Adventure of the Phantom Tax-Inspecter."* Here he recounts how Sir George once told him at Scarborough that they were under the spyglass scrutiny of one of the special Commissioners of Inland Revenue, who was perched on the roof of a nearby house and rather improbably dressed in "striped trousers, a morning coat, and a tall hat." When the skeptical son asked his father how he could be sure of the identity of the supposed onlooker, the implacable reply was, *"We happen to know."*