

# Poor Richard in Paris

***Mon Cher Papa: Franklin and the Ladies of Paris***, by Claude-Anne Lopez (Yale University Press. 404 pp. \$7.50), focuses on less familiar aspects of *Poor Richard*. Leo Gershoy has written a number of books on France's Revolutionary period.

By LEO GERSHOY

FROM early December 1776, when he disembarked at a little port on the bleak Brittany coast, to mid-July 1785 Benjamin Franklin discharged with extraordinary success a difficult mission entrusted to him and two fellow commissioners to France. What he accomplished during those eight and a half years is a well-worked chapter in the annals of diplomacy that Claude-Anne Lopez, the author of this charmingly urbane and delightful narrative, does not re-explore.

For the happy thought came to her, as she was working through thousands of documents in the Franklin Papers at Yale (of which she is an associate editor), to tell another story and focus the spotlight upon less-known facets of Franklin's personality. Her concern is with how he carried out his mission, what resources he drew upon to overcome the disadvantages and the heavy difficulties of his position.

This, then, is the story of her Franklin, the "French Franklin, the spry and



—From the book.

**Coiffure à l'Indépendance, 1778.**

mellow septuagenarian, the indomitable revolutionary, the tireless peacemaker," the best, she believes, of all the Franklins that the Western world already knew so well.

His position was indeed difficult. He had the mistrust and dislike of John Adams (not to speak of dear Abigail). He carried the burden of poor health and age—he was seventy when he arrived—and the handicap of a French that was less than perfect. Worse still, there was

the task of obtaining recognition for his young nation from a great power that was in no position to grant it, of obtaining aid and support for America's war from a government that was at peace with England.

But Franklin had rich assets, too. He was cultivated by the great spokesmen of liberal public opinion, and he cultivated them with disarming deftness and tact. He had the affection of many people in high places, not only for himself but perhaps even more because he was the focus of an admiration that extended to the whole American experiment—to the America, as Turgot put it, that was "the hope of the human race."

MOST important of all, the ladies of the salons adored him, the young and the not so young, the sentimental and the tough-minded, the beautiful and the less so. And in that age of the salon, Mrs. Lopez points out, perhaps with some overemphasis, "with its delicate network of influence, intrigue, and innuendo," the influence of the ladies was crucial. But to merit their approval the contestants had to observe the rules and play the game with the required wit, elegance, and detachment. They had to employ the social graces of light talk that veiled serious thought, of the winged letter that was to be pondered carefully. And of all these rules Franklin readily became a master.

Thus we are introduced, one after another, to those delightful creatures who adored their "*cher papa*." The narrative begins with Franklin's *amitié amoureuse* with his impressionable and slightly neurotic neighbor, Mme. Brillonn, in Passy. It moves on to Paris, where we meet the Comtesse d'Houdetot, the great romantic. Shortly after, Franklin is presented at court, where Marie-Antoinette patronized the *ambassadeur électrique*. He meets the modest and humble Mme. de Lafayette and her friends. Finally, at the rustic retreat of Auteuil, he meets the ever young and fascinating widow of the great Helvetius, with whom he fell deeply in love and whom he would have married had she agreed.

It would be incorrect to say that a new and different Franklin emerges from these vignettes. He remains the Franklin that Carl van Doren has given us, the American of ironic and detached common sense that Carl Becker depicted, the cool pragmatist who disliked dim perspectives and the chiaroscuro of things sensed but not seen. That essential Franklin is not effaced. To Mrs. Lopez we are indebted for a more mellow and more shaded figure, mellow but also playful, ironic and detached but romantic too, incredibly energetic, and as interested as he ever had been, if indeed not more so, in all that made up the stuff of living.

## Like the Achaean Gift: Full of Murder

By Robert Wallace

THE roses I got you Saturday, coming  
from the dentist's in the rain  
—pink, and pale white-like-yellow,  
in green tissue—

shed petals now that, singly,  
drop, and drift like swans  
headless in the pooling light  
of the table's top.

I take them back,  
and in the barren weather take them  
out to crush them in the trash,  
hoping you won't notice forever.

# Family Life Italian Style

*My Home, Sweet Home*, by Giovanni Guareschi, translated from the Italian by Joseph Green (Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 214 pp. \$4.50), reminisces, occasionally like an Italian Thurber, about the author's family. Walter Guzzardi, Jr., was formerly Time-Life bureau chief in Rome.

By WALTER GUZZARDI, JR.

THE WHOLE life of Giovanni Guareschi is, in a manner of speaking, an oxymoron. He is a gentle man of ferocious appearance, broad in the chest and sporting bristling mustaches that branch upward like the antlers of an elk. He writes simple, gentle sentences that have an oddly pathetic effect. But with those gentle sentences he produces biting results: biting enough to have made him, a few years ago, one of the men in Italy most hated by the Italian Left. He is characterized by an embracing kindness toward people; but he is capable of fierceness toward them too, and he became so fierce, at one point in his career, that he served a year in jail for libeling the memory of one of Italy's most beloved men, Alcide de Gasperi.

This mingling of contradictions proved piquant enough so that Guareschi was for a brief period one of Italy's most prominent journalists. His *Little World of Don Camillo*, the story of a kindly parish priest who battled Communists as though each and every one were really the antichrist, was an international success. In the U.S. it created what came close to a literary vogue. An Italian edition was accompanied by Guareschi's own drawings, which showed Communists with three nostrils (one, presumably, for breathing fire and brimstone), a caricature the Communists had a hard time living down. And Guareschi's Monarchist journal *Candido* spoke so eloquently on behalf of a lost cause that it was for a while the subject of violent argument on the floor of the Italian Chamber of Deputies (where, it must be said in fairness, most arguments tend to be violent). *Candido* still appears today, but causes less furor. In recent years Guareschi has become a kind of anachronism in Italy, where no one takes Monarchists very seriously any more, and he has also faded from the American literary scene.

It is a pleasure to welcome him back. Guareschi's new book, entitled *My*

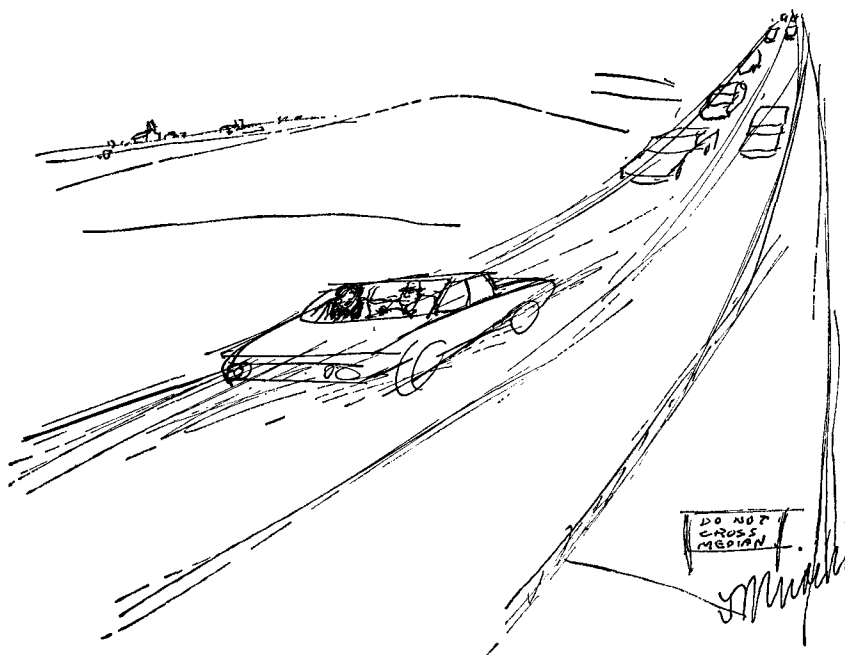
*Home, Sweet Home*, appeared in 1954 in Italy under the title *Corrierino delle famiglie*. But no part of it has been available in English until now. A collection of vignettes about Giovanni Guareschi's own family life, it is made up, as he says in the preface, of "the juice of my family . . . the same as the juice of millions of ordinary families." The book suffers from the inevitable shortcomings of this form: in a sense, *My Home, Sweet Home* is like a collection of short stories, and collections are hard to read through in one sitting.

In every other way, however, the book is successful. It has charm, grace, and wit; it is full of tolerance, tenderness, and warmth. Here and there, the character of La Pasionaria (Guareschi's daughter Carlotta) verges on the saccharine, and is, also here and there, hardly believable; but that small sin must be forgiven for the amusement that La Pasionaria affords. It is she, for example, who first challenges her mother, Margherita, with being afraid to go to the dentist: "You're old, and you've got a toothache, so you have to go to the dentist right away," she says relentlessly. In a marvelous if fraudulent rebuttal, Margherita waves away the charge of cowardice: "I'm going to an old-fashioned dentist, the kind that made

us suffer so terribly when we were children. If I tried to avoid the pain, I would feel I was betraying my own youth. Farewell . . . farewell to the generation of the anesthesia!" She and Guareschi then stalk out—to go to the movies, where he becomes ill on chestnuts ("I felt as though there was a wild beast in my stomach") and she suffers in silence. "But," adds the author, "there was the compensation of being able to look down . . . at the total defeat of the generation of the anesthesia."

Some of the anecdotes contain just a whiff of Thurber. In one splendid scene, the children and Guareschi gather round to save Margherita from another total defeat in baking a cake. They have to use nails instead of toothpicks to decide when the cake is done. In another, Guareschi discovers a little dog he calls Hamlet; the trouble is that the dog's master is named Hamlet, and he is furious at Guareschi's suggestion that Hamlet is the dog's name as well. "The dog's name is not Hamlet," says Guareschi placatingly. "Okay? But he's a dog that answers to the name of Hamlet. . . . The dog's name is not Hamlet, but he evinces a lively desire to be called Hamlet." Guareschi finally and predictably takes the splendid little dog home.

This is, to one's great relief, not a blockbuster of a book. There is no sex in it. There is no elegant or contrived writing. It is direct, simple, and pleasing. Except for one or two inexplicable lapses, such as the use of the adverb "unfriendly," the English translation by the pseudonymous Joseph Green retains the uncomplicated structure and telling effect of the Italian.



"You deliberately missed the exit to mother's."