

A Woman Scorned

A Mortal Flower, by Han Suyin (Putnam, 413 pp. \$6.95), continuing the novelist's serial autobiography, tells what it was like to be a Eurasian in pre-Mao Peking. Emily Hahn has written numerous books on China, where she lived for nine years.

By EMILY HAHN

THE LATE Sir George Sansom once told how, when he was attached to the British Embassy in Tokyo, he went to welcome the noted anthropologist Charles Seligman, whose ship was arriving at Yokohama. "I pushed through the crowd," he recalled, "and found him standing on deck. At sight of me he cried, 'Ah, Sansom, just the man I wanted to see: tell me, how can I find some half-castes?' And there he stood, surrounded by a number of them."

In the Chinese ports as well, Eurasians used to be part of the local scene, a group the size of which has never been appreciated by Westerners. Few outsiders troubled to notice how these people clung to their own hierarchy and tradition. To the world they showed a united front, but inevitably there were differences of opinion among them. Anglo-Chinese, Franco-Chinese, and German-Chinese considered themselves better than Portuguese-Chinese, or Macanese, and the Macanese heartily returned the compliment, all having inherited European prejudices. In addition there was stratification based on length of tenure, a child of Eurasians considering himself socially superior to the first-generation offspring of interracial marriage. It does not behoove us to laugh at these snobberies, which though foolish are hauntingly similar to some notions of our own; but it is no wonder if members of such a society, tightly enclosed by circumstance in a world where they are never sure they belong, should carry chips on their shoulders. In *A Mortal Flower*, the second volume in her as yet incomplete autobiographical series, Han Suyin tells a good deal—more, perhaps, than she intends to—of what it was like to be the daughter of a Chinese father and a Belgian mother in Peking before Mao.

But this account is less than half the book, and, placed side by side with much Mao-slanted history, is not enough to save the whole from being a heavy, indigestible mass of unblended compo-

nents. Over and over, Han Suyin takes a slice of childhood memory and slaps it between two great hunks of political sermon before serving it up. One could, I suppose, go through the volume picking out the filling and ignoring the dough, but the reward would be scanty. This is disappointing, because Han Suyin's is a brilliant mind. I have followed her work ever since the appearance of her second book, *A Many-Splendored Thing*, which led me to reread her first, *Destination Chungking*. When the popularity of *Many-Splendored* inevitably brought down ill-natured criticism on her head, I fought in her defense—not that she needed my help, but I admired her. In the best of Han Suyin's writing there has always been something extremely personal: she comes across, so the question boils down to a simple one of taste—if she's the sort of character you like, you like her books.

Thousands of women adored *Many-Splendored*, and thousands more, who don't read novels or much of anything else, flocked to see the picture and wept over it, feeling themselves deeply involved in Han Suyin's tragic love affair. As why shouldn't they? It *was* tragic, and she wrote of it well. That is why I am sorry that her autobiography is such hard going, and that she seems to have lost her sense of perspective, even within the smattering of her own history that is dispersed among ample quantities of Mao China's. The child Rosalie, as many-named Han Suyin here calls herself, leads a life of appalling spiritual discomfort. Was it really like that, really so spiteful, so full of snubs and petty hatreds? At any rate that is how she recalls it, which is the important thing. Her



Han Suyin—"rage at the rapist."

mother loved another child better than Rosalie. Her father loved her mother better than Rosalie. And soon she found the world outside very hostile, like the woman on the beach at Peitaiho who called her nasty names because Rosalie had thrown the woman's clothes on the sand, having found them in her family's already pre-empted bathing hut. Han Suyin remembers these things; she adds them up.

Rosalie was determined to be a doctor. When the time came she went for the necessary financial backing to Joseph Hers, a Belgian overlord of the railway company that employed her father. Hers did help her, getting a grant from the Boxer Indemnity Fund with which she would be able to study in Belgium. Admittedly he meant well: he thought he loved China, but Rosalie still resents that emotion, "a fierce, dominating, anxious, all-conquering possessiveness, characteristic of the warped, twisted, and altogether vicious relationship mis-called 'love' between the dominating and the suppressed, the powerful and the weak, the spoiler and the cheated." The passage is a good example of what is wrong with even the personal bits of *A Mortal Flower*. The writer makes a valid point, then spoils it with melodramatic overstatement: "Like many other foreigners he expressed this 'love' in sexual imagery; to all of them, China was the woman, the all-enveloping, soft, weak woman, who actually welcomed rape, welcomed being invaded."

Grinding her teeth with rage at the rapist, Rosalie accepts the grant and goes to Europe. After three years she passes her final examinations with honors. This volume takes leave of her aboard ship on her way back to China, where she has suddenly felt that she belongs. But in spite of this urge, she is still unaware of just where her salvation lies. It is 1938, and Mao bides his time.

Whether or not you can accept her politics, it was a good idea of hers to track a winding pilgrimage through the past until she reaches the fulfillment of modern China. But it hasn't come off. There is no balance. Of Han Suyin's own life she writes, of course, with firsthand knowledge; but when it comes to the rise of Mao Tse-tung she can only use hand-outs and propaganda. Her passion and resentment, no matter how scorching, cannot give life to those old bones, and the trials she went through, the snubs and gossip and schoolgirl malice, seem mere pinpricks, regardless of how much they have obviously hurt her; they are disproportionate to what she is trying to measure up to. One is left with the rueful conviction that a woman who cherishes such grievances will not find things all that much better in Mao's China. Or anywhere else.

Behind the Screen Scenes

A Girl Like I, by Anita Loos (Viking, 275 pp. \$5.95), reminisces about the author's early years with a scapegrace father, in the Hollywood of the silent era, and among the gilt-edged denizens of New York between the wars. Arthur Knight is a film critic for *Saturday Review*.

By ARTHUR KNIGHT

IN AN era when every teen-ager who has sold a million records or introduced a new dance craze rushes into print with his ghosted autobiography, it is downright refreshing to read the reminiscences of a lady who not only has lived long enough to have something worth recalling, but has the literary ability to confide her thoughts to paper unassisted.

Anita Loos, a child prodigy, has been writing for fun and profit since she was thirteen, sold her first movie script at sixteen, and created the perdurable *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, which remains her *chef d'oeuvre*, when barely thirty. Inevitably, her career brought her into contact with such literary lions as Mencken, Sherwood Anderson, and Vachel Lindsay, as well as movie greats like Griffith, Fairbanks, and Mary Pickford; and it is about these that she spins her curiously truncated autobiography. Her book does not really end; it seems, rather, to peter out soon after the publication of *Blondes*, leaving almost forty years unaccounted for.

The years that are accounted for, however, include colorful recollections of growing up in California around the turn of the century with a roving father whose taste for new ventures was apparently exceeded only by his appetite for new ladies. One of these ventures, a shabby burlesque house in downtown Los Angeles, provided Miss Loos with her first glimpse of moving pictures (paradoxically, it was *The Life of Christ*, presented on the same bill with a baggy-pants comic and a line of strippers); and so enamored was she that before long she was herself supplying scenarios in vast quantities to the movie companies, becoming a special favorite of D. W. Griffith. For him she wrote the titles for his masterpiece, *Intolerance*; and about him she writes with a warmth, affection, and genuine respect found rarely elsewhere in the book.

Her sprightly scripts, however, were not suited to Griffith's solemn notions of film art. Most of them remained in his files until discovered there by her husband-to-be, director John Emerson, who was casting about for material that could utilize the buoyant, bumptious charm of young Douglas Fairbanks. Together, Emerson and Loos concocted most of Fairbanks's early hits, becoming perhaps the first eminent writer-director team in movie history; the couple was certainly far more successful as a writer-director team, Miss Loos implies, than as husband and wife.

A move to New York enabled her to meet the Algonquin's famed Round Table, whose more illustrious members are duly noted (she includes a devastating deflation of the rubicund Alexander Woollcott as poseur and pansy). A post-World War I swing through Europe introduced her to Gertrude Stein and her select circle. About all of them Miss Loos offers amusing anecdotes and shrewd observations.

The only pity is that she has less than



—Doug Davis.

Anita Loos—"less than total recall."

total recall. Minor inaccuracies stud the manuscript—Biograph Studio instead of Mutual, Gershwin's *Embraceable You* instead of *Love Walked In*, Eileen or Arlene instead of Aileen Pringle, not to mention D. W. Griffith's "discovery" of Fairbanks. Since one purpose of this kind of "I was there" writing is to provide those less fortunate with a useful historical tool, it is particularly regrettable that Miss Loos did not check her recollections against more reliable sources.

Learning to Swim

By David Wagoner

LEARNING to swim meant watching from the shore
 Good, grown-up swimmers laughing and diving
 At the end of the broken pier, over my head.
 They lay in the sun or waved at floating girls
 Or dived into the water and came up shining
 Out of high spirits like a school of fish.
 I shrank from the water like my bathing suit
 But went in anyway, wading as far
 As my chin, rising on tiptoes at the last
 But sinking back and turning.
 There was no way out: nothing but jagged pilings.

One day, my feet came up by themselves: I crawled
 Through the grey cross-waves, mouth shut water-tight,
 Believing I would die from swimming badly
 While the dry lifeguards, smiling up the beach,
 Walked upside-down on the world with their bare hands.

As the watery raw air sank down my throat,
 I saw the ladder, reached for it, held on,
 And took the rungs as tightly as handshakes
 But found myself alone on the platform,
 Watching good swimmers start away from there,
 All stroking idly through the afternoon
 In the frank sunlight, calm on the surface,
 To the impossibly distant rock whose light
 Marked the horizon like the evening star.