

Manacled by a Wedding Ring

THE HUSBAND. By Natalie Anderson Scott. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1949. 270 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by ANN F. WOLFE

IF YOU value your comfort of mind, you will read this book only in broad daylight, preferably on a sunny morning. Finish it, at least, long before your bed hour, giving yourself time to shake off the seeping horror that must otherwise infiltrate your sleep and harass your dreams. "The Husband" is a psychological Grand Guignol so subtly and insidiously staged as to show up the average crime story as a clumsy bit of blood-letting *pour le sport*.

The framework of this psychological masterpiece is innocent enough. In Puritan Massachusetts two centuries back Mr. Ebenezer Rawson takes Cassie Harris to wife. With the fresh high-heartedness of youth Cassie faces the problem of adjusting herself to married life in Lansbury, the town where her husband is a respected leading citizen. Inasmuch as the marriage effects few changes in Mr. Rawson's pattern of living, it is the young wife who must carry the burden of making the new relationship successful and happy. Despite financial privation and the hardships involved in rearing a family, Cassie's love for her husband grows until it becomes the most abject form of enslavement.

The status of woman being what it was in Puritan New England, there is little, externally at any rate, that is unique about Cassie's married life. Hers was not the only wedding ring, 200 years ago or since, to turn manacle. In Lansbury there are other women who lose girlish lightness of step and heart in the routine drudgery of wifehood and motherhood. True, no other Lansbury husband can smile and smile like Mr. Rawson and be a villain. On the other hand, some of Cassie's women neighbors have to put up with stingy mates given to slipping out by night to "the ordinary" and the robust companionship of red-shoed wenches.

What gives Mrs. Scott's new novel significance is the gradual debasement of Cassie's spirit under the compulsions of devotion to the whited sepulchre she gratefully calls husband. I cannot recall ever reading so exquisitely hideous a history of spiritual debauchment. Preying on Cassie's kindly trusting nature, Mr. Rawson corrupts her wholesome love for him into a morbid obsession. His is a refined and delicate vampirism that imperceptibly drains the sweet-

ness and freedom of a woman's soul, to say nothing of draining the material substance of her parents' small savings.

Under the guidance of the immaculately ruced Rawson hand Cassie becomes a cruel shrew, a groveling, self-righteous creature who rationalizes her husband's tyranny and lives only to scheme for his personal comfort and his occasional physical favors. Here, in very truth, is a step-by-step study in killing with kindness—the *with* of accompaniment, not instrumentality. The latter would have been delicious martyrdom, delicious beyond Cassie's most sensual dreams.

There is no question about it: Mrs. Scott has extraordinary virtuosity in novelizing the psychic progression of evil. She integrates into sinister unity the contrapuntal motifs of husbandly domination and wifely subjection. She weaves Puritan overtones into her harrowing symphony—memories of witchcraft, pictures of stock and gibbet, exemplars of religious hypocrisy, glances into warped hearts that seek emotional release in public punishments and executions. She signals the



—Robert Campbell Barry.

Natalie Anderson Scott—virtuosity with "the psychic progression of evil."

stages of Cassie's psychological descent to Avernus by such simple notes as the metamorphosis of attitude toward Esmeralda and Timothy, or Mr. Rawson's predilection for blue as the prerogative of brides.

As for the climax—women readers will find themselves defensively clutching their throats.

Murder in Africa

PORT AFRIQUE. By Bernard Victor Dryer. New York: Harper & Bros. 1949. 237 pp. \$2.50

Reviewed by VICTOR P. HASS

BERNARD VICTOR DRYER, who looks like Beau Geste but is a cancer specialist and who writes in a manner reminiscent of some of Graham Greene's best "entertainments," proves in these pages that the first novelist need not use entirely new materials for his maiden flight.

The ingredients of "Port Afrique" are well worn—though they have worn well—but such is Mr. Dryer's skill as a teller of tales that these ingredients are burnished so brightly that they give the appearance of being brand new.

Readers of "suspense thrillers" will recognize the mixture: the sleepy African coastal town, the philosophical chief of police with his exquisite manners, the apparently faithful and certainly beautiful young wife who has just been bumped off, the intense and adoring young husband who refuses to believe it was suicide, the "other woman" riddled with hate and jealousy, the weakling husband of that other woman, the hunt, the de-

nouement, the dramatic climax. In literary form the story usually is given a sultry title like "Port Afrique"; when it reaches the screen it is generally called "Casablanca" or "Algiers." It has been told hundreds of times.

Mr. Dryer has told it once again in "Port Afrique" and it is the measure of his success that he has made it not only interesting but exciting despite the fact that the veteran whodunit reader is bound to spot the stinker midway of the yarn.

The opening is a setting that Mr. Alfred Hitchcock probably can trot out of a movie-lot warehouse tomorrow morning though it may need a bit of retouching, so often has it been used. You remember it: the tramp freighter plowing through the night, the single figure silhouetted on the deck. Then the tying to the dock and the bright lights playing on upturned faces and the single figure walking down the gangplank.

The lone figure, in this case, is Rip Reardon, much-decorated American soldier returning to his home in French Africa. Fresh out of an Army hospital, Rip has been summoned home because Georgette, his gorgeous wife, had been found dead some days

before. "Suicide," said chess-playing Colonel Jacques Moussac, commandant of the gendarmes, failing to mention some mysterious X-rays he had stashed away in a secret file. "Suicide, hell," said Rip.

So—just like in the fillums, Mamie—Rip goes on a tear and then goes home to his lonely plantation house plastered to the eyebrows. There he finds the luscious Ynes, who looks like Georgette and is even wearing one of the dead wife's dressing gowns. Rip doesn't understand but he's drunk and lonely and she is lovely and the house is empty so they go into one of those scenes usually denoted by asterisks, but Mr. Dryer skips the asterisks and gives you the gamey details.

Next morning, remorseful and savage, Rip turns bloodhound and starts to unravel the whole nasty business. The trail leads into many dark corners where a variety of instruments blunt and otherwise are wielded with varying success, pauses long in a flashy bordello operated by a sleazy character yclept Nino, runs into a straightaway where the odor of blackmail is singularly oppressive, stops in Moussac's private office for a look at those X-rays, and then hightails it into the jungle, where, in the last reel, Rip finds all the answers he was looking for and a few others he hadn't counted on. I do no more than borrow from the advertising the movie people will unquestionably use when I tell you the wind-up is terrific. I kept seeing Mr. Humphrey Bogart, the muscle man, as Rip and I strongly suspect that Mr. Dryer kept seeing him, too. Oddly, though, Moussac kept coming to me as Maxime Weygand.

Trite as all of this sounds, Mr. Dryer has made it considerably better than average mystery fare. He has a way with situations that wrings the last drop of suspense from them and a way with characters—even those straight out of stock—that makes them seem original even though the faces do remain vaguely familiar. Best of all, he creates mood as Graham Greene creates it. Indeed, in the matter of Mr. Dryer's probing of Rip's embittered mind, Mr. Greene might well pick up a useful hint or two.



Outcast

ALIEN LAND. By Willard Savoy. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1949. 320 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by ANN PETRY

"ALIEN LAND," by Willard Savoy, is a first novel, and a very good one. It is written with passion and with anger, so that it has a vitality which makes it linger in the mind. Reduced to its simplest terms it is the story of a man's loss of the sense of personal dignity, a loss that began in his childhood, continued on through his adolescence, and into manhood; and of how he struggled to regain it. And finally did.

Kern Roberts, the hero, lived in two worlds—one white, the other Negro. He moved back and forth between these worlds, uncomfortable in both of them. His mother was white. His father, a Negro fair enough to pass for white, chose to live as a Negro. Kern grew up in Washington, D. C. He was a lonely, friendless child, learning about contempt and hatred when he should have been learning about love. But he testified against the Negro who murdered his mother, and he was never permitted to forget it. His teachers in the school "for colored" reminded him of the part he had played in the trial; his classmates called him a traitor; and his father made no effort to conceal his disapproval of the boy's testimony.

Later on he went to school in Vermont, where he passed for white. He was happy there until his classmates found out that he was a Negro; and then he left, embittered, cynical, determined to live as a Negro. Next he went to Valley View, a Negro college in the South. But he was so terrified by what he had seen and experienced there that he fled the place, made up his mind to live as a white man. And did. He became a successful radio script writer in New York. His life went along smoothly until he met and fell in love with Marianne, a white girl. He was afraid he'd lose her if he revealed his racial identity—but he told her anyway. She rejected him at first, and then decided to marry him.

The author, Willard Savoy, is a public-relations officer assigned to the Air Information Division of the United States Air Force. In this first book he has told an exciting story, filled with terror and violence. Occasionally he forgets that he is writing a novel and inserts a mile-long speech which suddenly, and disconcertingly, brings the action to a standstill. But when he returns to his story, the book

is wonderfully alive, moving at a headlong pace.

"Alien Land" contains some unforgettable scenes: the inside of a Jim Crow train headed South, carrying students from the North "into an alien land—alien, they to it, and it to them"; the interior of a house in one of the narrow, dingy alleys in Washington, where a man has just lost his job; the discussion of the race problem in a barber shop, at a church meeting; the relationship between Negro customer and white shopkeeper in a small store south of the Mason-Dixon line.

In addition, Lieutenant Savoy has created a number of vivid, full-bodied characters: Jake, the master craftsman who loved the feel of wood; Kern's aunt Paula, who had the gift of laughter and yet died crying; and Nettie, the ignorant, vindictive maid-of-all-work who helped make Kern Roberts a lost and lonely child.

And so you should read "Alien Land" because it's a bang-up story. But you should also read it because it offers an unusual comment on the whole subject of race relations in the United States. The chances are that you won't be able to put it down until you finish it.

Ann Petry's first book, "The Street," a novel of New York's Harlem, won a Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship Award. Her latest work is "Country Place," the story of a New England town.

Old Invalid's Days

TO BE A PILGRIM. By Joyce Cary. New York: Harper & Bros. 1949. 341 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by HARRISON SMITH

JOYCE CARY'S new novel has the traits that have made the long family chronicle an enduring record of English character and history. "I was a pilgrim only by race," writes the old dying man at the end of the story. "England took me with her on a few stages of her journey. She, poor thing, was born upon the road, and lives in such a dust of travel that she never knows where she is."

Old Tom Wilcher is in the process of dying all through the novel. His family, cousins, nieces, nephews, and their children, seize hold of him, for in the death of this ancient, twisted bachelor lies some security for all of them. Uncle Tom owns all of the family wealth that remains to the Wilchers, a dilapidated country house, a musty place in London, and some

(Continued on page 33)