

Dissection of a Woman

WE HAPPY FEW. By Helen Howe.
New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1946. 345 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by HARRISON SMITH

HARVARD University has always been fair game for the novelist who was endowed with wit, and a certain malicious affection for the Boston Brahmins who had developed in Cambridge a tough integument against the grosser aspects of this world. George Weller's memorable and out-of-print "Not to East, Not for Love" attacked Harvard at its source, as John Marquand's "The Late George Apley" and "H. M. Pulham, Esq." undermined it at its perimeter. As far as my knowledge extends, all of these pot shots at the case-hardened intellectuals and social die-hards who have nursed at Harvard's refined breast have been aimed at males. Helen Howe's second novel, "We Happy Few," is their female counterpart.

It is a safe guess that the week following its publication has been pretty hard on the upper ranks of Cambridge society. It is the kind of novel in which the characters seem to have been drawn from life, and it must be painful in these days to imagine that one of the circle of intellectual snobs at whom Miss Howe points scornfully may be your elegant, cultured best friend, or even yourself. The women and some of the men in the charmed circle that surrounds the Dorothea Calcott of this novel are excruciatingly broad-minded. Religion, patriotism, love, the study of beauty itself, which they presume occupies their hearts and sets them apart from the ordinary human being, are never accepted or spoken of seriously. But this glittering surface of cleverness tinged with malice, this superficial charm, hides the marks of deep-rooted envy and jealousy; as the surface glaze of their old furniture hides the ravages of the worm.

Dorothea comes from a prosperous family of broad-minded "pagans," living beautifully at an old school for the right kind of boys who would eventually carry on the Harvard tradition. She marries a wealthy young Bostonian from a long line of Harvard ancestors who is inevitably teaching and pursuing an abstruse if culturally satisfying thesis. Dorothea becomes the vivacious and palidly beautiful leader of a charmed circle consisting of as fine a set of highly educated snobs as our literature has seen for a long time. A chaste woman at first and a reasonably cold wife, she dominates everyone including her hus-

band by her quick social awareness, her deep ambition to push her John into the irreproachably respectable position of headmaster of one of the colleges. One child is born, a son, who is sent in a mood of daring to Exeter, instead of to a church school, as if, says the author, "he was going to Tuskegee." The diversions of this little ruling gang included public admiration of each other, private scorn of others' opinions and gifts, and heated discussions over Henry James, T. S. Eliot, and Herman Melville, who had them all in thrall. In fact, if the war had not come along every one of the men would have turned out a book on the author of "Moby Dick."

The war naturally blew esoteric Harvard to bits and its concussion sent Dorothea's husband into the British Navy and that chaste and politely sneering lady panting into the arms of a complete vulgarian, a New York outsider who had a gift with women and with the New York stock market, for he was, of all things for a Calcott to go to bed with, a stock broker. Dorothea discovers physical love and jealousy; and when John is pronounced dead, she is an exhausted and fragmented woman.

The rest of the novel is devoted to Miss Howe's attempt to show that there is a real woman's heart beating in her heroine's breast. Johnny, her son, enlists in the Navy at seventeen, and his mother goes to Montana to be near him. She endures what are for her the hideous discomforts and crudities of wartime travel. Among the plain and pleasant people near the camp she finds herself acting the role of a lady bountiful and is humiliated when it is discovered that she has a rich and splendid background of foreign travel which she has never revealed. Her cure, according to Miss Howe, is finally accomplished when in the last chapter a neglected baby



—Halsman

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she holds in her arms is sick down her aristocratic back. "Looking back across the continent she felt no trace of wistfulness. Mrs. John Calcott of Brattle Street, Cambridge, was dead and buried.

It may be that the author has constructed only too memorable and polished a figure of the younger Dorothea, the exquisite dodger of all the common vices, except envy, so that in the reader's mind there is a tinge of suspicion that this new and more human creature would melt like a snow woman when she returns to Cambridge. There is little question that the gay, if shallow, Dorothea is more charming than the woman who has learned the secret of her own nature. But whether she should have been reformed or not, "We Happy Few" will remain a permanent addition to the list of novels that skilfully and with some cruelty dissect a woman's nature. It is the second step of a career as promising as any other woman writer's in this country.

Hesiod and Homer

By Louis Kent

BRONZE man, iron man, less than god,
Shouldering axe, breaking sod,
These men labored for Hesiod.

Spray stung, sea bitten, brine wrung roamer,
Circe's loss and the Sirens', Homer
Gave Odysseus to trough and comber.

Lacking hero to act like god,
He robed the bronze man, armed with clod.
Hand for a spade, heart for a sod,
Still they labored for Hesiod.

One Little Island and How It Grew

IMPERIAL COMMONWEALTH. By Lord Elton. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1946, x + 544 pp. \$5.

Reviewed by GARRETT MATTINGLY

THIS narrative of the expansion of England, from John Cabot to VE Day, is offered to the American public as an account of the rise, present structure, and future aims of "that most fruitful of recorded experiments in international organization, the British Empire." Although many of us know rather more about the British, at home and overseas, than we did five years ago, most of us still entertain a good many obsolete notions and foolish prejudices about their policies. We need to get rid of such obstacles to understanding, lest we be misled again by hate-mongers and pressure groups out of the way of international coöperation, the only way to peace. No people on earth has a bigger stake in peace than the people of Britain, or a better will towards it. No other people has anything like so many urgent, complex, painful, and exasperating problems to solve, or is moving toward the necessary solutions in, on the whole, so enlightened and civilized a spirit. Any book, therefore, which can help us to a more sympathetic understanding of the background and motive forces of that complex aggregate of self-governing, independent democracies, semi-autonomous colonies, protectorates, and experiments in trusteeship which we call the British Empire should be especially welcome.

Towards the understanding of so complicated a phenomenon there will be many approaches, some more and some less likely to appeal to American readers. The approach adopted in this book is to make no compromise at all with any of the critics of British policy. Godfrey Elton writes in the tradition of Froude and Seely, and a little in that of Rudyard Kipling and Noel Coward. He can find something to say in defense of even the Opium War, even of General Dyer, of Amritsar infamy. As he tells England's story, from the time that "individual English courage and enterprise" challenged the might of Spain upon the sea in "a great uprush of moral energy," empire was not so much sought by the English as thrust upon them because they peculiarly deserved it. Just as at the outset England was saved from the Spanish Armada "by the native qualities of the islanders . . . despite their government," so in each succeeding crisis the English, though always unprepared and heavily outnumbered, al-

ways triumphed nevertheless, "for success in war depends upon the social pattern of a country and upon its morale," and in these respects the English were clearly superior, alike to the gloomy despotisms and corrupt aristocracies to which they were customarily opposed, and to the selfish, mercenary burghers and revolutionary mobs which they occasionally had to encounter.

This was, of course, a good thing. For the Spaniards "had no tradition of individual enterprise" (shades of Cortez and Cabeza de Baca!) and "the virtues of Spain were not the imperial virtues"; the Dutch were "never great colonists," and the French were "not really an imperial people." This last is so clear that Lord Elton is genuinely puzzled by the fact that the French were served in India by administrators of genius. It was, he says, a paradox. Obviously the Germans, who, under the leadership of Bismarck, are described as beginning the colonial scramble after 1870(!), deserved empire even less. At this time, however, England reëntered the race for colonies only reluctantly, compelled by "humanitarian motives" and "a desire to protect the native races against exploitation," and although virtue was rewarded by territory four times as

large and many as rich as the Germans were able to grab, this is described as "less than the lion's share."

Lord Elton scorns to account for British imperialism by "glib economic theories and reasons of state." You will search his text in vain for any discussion of the importance of coal, or rubber, or oil, for any light on the connection between the legislation for India and the Lancashire cotton industry, or any hint of the terms on which the Portuguese or the Dutch held their enfeoffed empires, or any suggestion that British statesmen tended to eschew annexation between 1815 and 1875 (they copped little more than Singapore, New Zealand, a third of India and some African stations in that period) because free trade, industrial development, and the British Navy made the whole world virtually their colonial domain. The wisdom of statesmen, particularly Charles II, Castlereagh, and Joseph Chamberlain, gets a little more credit than geographic advantages and economic forces, but the general inferiority of foreigners, and the "hereditary genius of the English people," really provide an adequate explanation for England's expanding greatness.

In spite of surface similarities, it would be unfair to liken this method of historical explanation to the dark mysticism of blood and soil which Englishmen, lately, did so much to overthrow. And it would be equally



—From "War Pictures by British Artists."

Barmaid at the Red Lion. A painting by Edward Ardizzone.