

Golden Coast and Barren Interior



"Words Are Stones," by Carlo Levi (translated by Angus Davidson; Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 212 pp. \$3.75), describes the life and the land of the Sicilian peasantry. It is reviewed by John H. Secondari, a commentator for the American Broadcasting Company and the author of the novel "Coins in the Fountain," published in 1952.

By John H. Secondari

AS A prophet is least attended in his own home, Carlo Levi is less thought of in Italy than abroad. Certainly much less in Italy than in the United States, where his reputation rests solidly on the impact and success of his wartime "Christ Stopped at Eboli." That was possibly the first book to pull back the curtain from the tragic, desert-like, dusty world of the Southern Italian peasant, and allow a foreign audience to peek. It was only after the war that the Italian Communists made the conditions of the Southern Italian peasant and land reform twin subjects generally familiar to the world at large.

"Words Are Stones" deals with that same world. It is about Sicily, and the fantastically beautiful sea which now is almost completely empty of fish. It describes that ancient life, a mixture of Arab and Greek, Spanish and Norman, and a little bit of Italian. It pictures the golden coast and the barren interior, where peasants live and die where they are born, never even finding out what lies on the other side of the mountain. It tells of the slowly changing world which is—in one of its aspects—substituting trucks for the painted Sicilian carts. All this Mr. Levi does.

He deals with the social aspects of this tragic land, and the hopeless lives of the peasants. He writes of the feudal estates and the Mafia (which, he says, enforces the law of the estate) and of the Italian police who look on and allow the terror and the murders which are the Mafia's tools. He does this at length in the third part of the book, which reports the murder of a peasant Communist organizer in a village in Sicily.

To an extent, Mr. Levi also considers the social value of things Sicilian when, in another part of the book, he reports the visit of then mayor of

New York, Vincent Impellitteri, to his native village in Sicily. The comment lies in a note of wonder at the almost divine value which the villagers placed on this son of theirs who had traveled so far and risen so high. But Mr. Levi's wonder is counterpointed by the vein of his personal contempt that people should believe that there was anything extraordinary in what Mr. Impellitteri had been industrious enough, smart enough, lucky enough to achieve in his life. Above all, the contempt that the people who believe this should be these tragic people of Sicily, whose backward lives he has chosen to champion for a change to the better.

To this reader, it is a note which, once discerned in this first part of the three-part book, cannot but be noticed elsewhere in the pages. Mr. Levi does not feel himself one of the peasants; he says so quite frankly. He merely observes them, and writes about them. One has the impression he does not understand them. And Mr. Levi's observations are brief indeed, for he tells in the introduc-

tion that each of his visits preceding the writing of the book lasted no more than two days.

Which raises the point of how this book should be judged. Certainly not as a report, since it is admittedly too shallow in research for a report. Essentially it is not a political pamphlet, though there are overtones of politics, as there are in everything Mr. Levi writes. Then perhaps as a travelogue, written in a language somewhat more readable than Baedeker.

From the title one imagines that Mr. Levi intended every word to be a stone cast against the complacent lack of interest of the Italian government in Rome. In English the words are more bread crumbs than stones. In Italian they could hardly carry any more weight, because it is not words that are stones, but facts, and this book lacks facts.

And there may lie the explanation of why Mr. Levi is more highly regarded here than in his own country—because in Italy the people who read his books are also acquainted with the facts.



Criminal Record



BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF THE YEAR.

Edited by David C. Cooke. Dutton. \$2.95. Thirteenth annual collection contains twelve previously serialized yarns largely by name-writers (Stuart Palmer, John D. MacDonald, William Campbell Gault, the late Craig Rice, et al.); snap endings stressed; introduction is excellent survey of postwar mystery field. Usual A-1 job.

NIGHT OF RECKONING. By John Stephen Strange. Crime Club. \$3.75. Bigwig in Connecticut manufacturing town convicted of murder; old retainers get bum deal; police chief toils as Diane of 1955 strikes; much marriage and giving in marriage (also divorce). Wide-screen job.

AND FOUR TO GO. By Rex Stout. Viking. \$2.95. Quartette of tales, all set in New York, stars Nero Wolfe and features Archie Goodman, one or other of whom is actually present at three

killings (and both at one). Photographs (here reproduced in half-tone) are essential clue in one case; orchids present (vital in another case); Inspector Cramer omnipresent (but never learns). Sound as a bell.

THE PEEPING TOM MURDERS. By Jack Baynes. Crest. 25¢. Morocco Jones, Chicago eye, takes West Coast assignment involving big-time blackmail, scandal sheet, mean cops, friendly reporters, cultist leader, beautiful gals, South American playboy, corpses, all the usual.

A BULLET FOR A BLONDE. By Paul Kruger. Dell. 25¢. Twenty-year-old heiress takes .32 slug in head; Vince Latimer, Rocky Mountain area eye, looks into matters, as does good Lieutenant Kranz of city police; numerous other corpses are lined up before payoff (but who picks up Latimer's tab?). Nicely handled. —SERGEANT CUFF.

Amidst an Alien Culture

“Wai Wai: Through the Forests North of the Amazon,” by Nicholas Guppy (Dutton, 373 pp. \$3.95), is a travel book about a remote equatorial land, just north of Brazil. Ivan Sanderson, our reviewer, has written many books about animals, wildlife, and his jungle expeditions.

By Ivan Sanderson

THIS is a travel book in the truly great tradition, written with the oldtime—nineteenth-century—combination of modesty, ebullience, and some quite harmless braggadocio. Here and there it is infused with long passages of profound and gentle contemplation such as comes to a kindly, thinking man when he is far away and alone, amidst an alien culture and in close touch with nature. All of this is the more remarkable not only for its appearance halfway through this aggravating and, in many ways, depressing century, but also because it relates the incidents of a journey through lands that any of us could reach in a few hours by air from Florida—if there were any place to land.

The country of the Wai Wai and their related tribesmen, the hitherto unvisited Mawayan Amerinds, lies athwart the southern border of Brit-

ish Guiana, slightly in north Brazilian territory, not too far (according to an ordinary atlas) from the north coast of South America. It is a land of endless equatorial forests blanketing the earth beyond a modest range of mountains, and it forms the watershed between the great river systems that flow north to the Orinoco, east to the Atlantic, and south to the Amazon. Neither white nor black man had been there before and even the Amerinds from the nearby coastal areas have not contacted their brethren thereabouts.

Nicholas Guppy was born in Trinidad, grandson of (yes, it's true) the discoverer of the famous little tropical fish common to our city apartment tanks—the guppy. He is a botanist and a forest officer, and a very good one. He is also a scientist and a man born with the wonderful breadth of vision and gentility of mind that permits him to contemplate the whole world of nature that he encounters on his ecological travels and not only to sympathize with and enjoy the lives of the peoples he visits but to analyze their way of life and relate it to the findings of our pragmatic sciences, in which he is well versed.

As a result, Mr. Guppy really puts the works of missionaries in their true light. He fully acknowledges the humanity of these dedicated, if misguided folk and their hospitality to

himself. He likewise frankly indicates the weaknesses of the spiritual side of the so-called “primitive” folk with whom he spent so many weeks, but then again also acknowledges gestures of compassion and decency displayed by the worst of their expenents whom he met and who had every cause to be jealous of the author's superior medical knowledge.

There is so much in this book—of humanity, human relationships, and human interest, as well as its unpretentious record of truly scientific men who sweat, starve, and shake with fever just to find out what kinds of previously unknown trees grow in what unmapped tropical valleys—that it is impossible to preview, let alone review. It is a splendid book and outstanding among straight travelogues. It may be one of the last glimpses we shall have of the living descendants of our mutual ancestors before they are shattered in mind, body, and estate by our unavoidable but nonetheless ugly culture. Nick Guppy liked these honest, well-mannered people; you will like them too.

PROGRESS IN PERSIA: Sarbandan, a small Persian village in the hills near Teheran, was trapped in its own dark age, a victim of destitution and ignorance, its level of existence scarcely human. The now universal problem of helping such villages approach the twentieth century was undertaken by what would seem a very unlikely candidate, the beautiful eighth daughter of a tutor and advisor to the Qajar kings. Najmeh Najafi, who with Helen Hinckley is the author of “*Reveille for a Persian Village*” (Harper, \$4), decided a few years ago to close up her fashionable dress shop in Teheran and study in the United States, so that she might somehow fulfill an uncertain and often confused dream of helping the villagers of her native Iran to a better existence. The book is the story of how, after several false starts, she came to Sarbandan and, through the successive seasons, was able to define and crystallize that dream. Miss Najafi's success was twofold: the gradual metamorphosis of Sarbandan and its painful emergence from the remote past, and what Miss Najafi describes as her own spiritual renewal and sense of fulfillment.

Equipped with very little money, considerable help from her friends among the Iranian upper classes, and a good deal of drive and simple hearted idealism, Miss Najafi confronted the familiar struggle with apathy and superstition of the villagers. When she arrived conditions were unbelievable. Hunger lingered and threatened at every mud door-

Valentine

By Hollis Summers

She is like pearls, of course, and rubies, and other Extravagances, including dahlias and Venus;
She's a compendium of loveliness
Sufficient for my knowledge of the genus.

Still, loveliness has always been a bonus
For the loved as much as for the lover,
Before and during and after all. This
Is a fact I was delighted to discover.

And knowledge, such as loveliness disperses—
Despite what men including me have said—
Is frequently insufficient for a body
Which also includes an organ called the head.

Considerate of myself, male, I
Would dwell on flamboyancies. But unsheathing
Vanity a moment: she is a house
And food and the simple act of breathing.