

BOOKS

Reviewed by Oakley Johnson, Beatrice Dorn, Clinton Simpson, Edwin Rolfe

A Calendar of Sin, by Evelyn Scott. Jonathan Cape & Harrison Smith. (Two volumes). \$5.00.

In *A Calendar of Sin*, Evelyn Scott has described the farce-comedy of bourgeois morals over four generations. A combination of realism, acute psychological insight, breadth of social view, and a balanced and distributed selection of scenes and characters, the totality spiced with amused and hidden satire, produce in this two-volume novel a gigantic and pathetic series of flaming unnecessary tragedies—melodramas, the author calls them—of distorted sex. Miss Scott's original plan, she says, was to treat equally of love and hunger in American life, but the single theme of love proved colossal enough. The story, carrying the George and the Dolan families and their intermarrying neighbors from the close of the Civil War to the opening of the World War, narrates the subjective background of capitalist growth. It is in effect the fictional and psychological counterpart to Myers' *History of Great American Fortunes*.

As Miss Scott says in her *Contempo* 'self-review', *A Calendar of Sin* is the third book in the series of objective social portrayals which she began in *Migrations* and continued in *The Wave*. The philosophy of the book is deterministic. "People appear to choose," says the author, in the *Contempo* article, "and they have not chosen. They appear to decide and a necessity as immediate as hunger has directed them."

That *A Calendar of Sin* is well written does not need to be repeated here. What we have to consider is the value of the novel as an interpretation of the life of a period. It is partly Miss Scott's accurate and realistic observation that make this novel, as a historic picture of capitalism, significant to proletarian critics, and partly the titanic sweep of her imaginative survey. But this significance is due, also, to Miss Scott's more than usually emancipated social viewpoint. The implicit irony in this relentless picturing of enslaved minds is not possible to one who is also similarly enslaved. The canny de-flating of the supposed heroic private lives of our captains of industry and politics is not possible for a writer to whom fatherland and the social status quo are sacred.

There are in *A Calendar of Sin* exactly three characters whose conscious point of view may be described, broadly, as revolutionary. One is Maurice George, who is partly a sentimental middle-class socialist and partly a 'philosophical anarchist'; the second is Fred Sloane, muddled proletarian worker and member of the Industrial Workers of the World; the third is Mose Summerfield, a "saturnine and uncommunicative" newspaper reporter who insists, cynically, that no escape from political corruption is possible outside a 'socialistic state', but at the same time 'guesses' that he doesn't 'want that'. These three represent the entire rebellious element in American society—if we regard *A Calendar of Sin* as an artistic reflection of the complete scene of the period—from 1867 to 1914. All three, furthermore, even Maurice George, are essentially minor characters. True, they do on the whole satisfactorily represent the conscious anti-capitalistic forces of the time.

It must be admitted that Miss Scott, more than most of our writers, has a broad awareness of the relation between character and the social scene, and of the importance of art as an interpreter of life in the group. In her essay on William Faulkner she says that, although art is not life, yet "conclusions can be drawn from it as surely as from 'life', because, as fine art, it is life organized to make revelation fuller." Furthermore, Miss Scott's long association with group protest against race prejudice, against the political subordination of women, and against such instances of capitalist oppression as the Mooney and the Harlan atrocities, indicates the fact that social sympathy and social understanding form an important part of her equipment as a conscious artist.

OAKLEY JOHNSON

Three Pairs of Silk Stockings, by Panteleimon Romanoff. Scribner's. \$2.50.

The Dogs, by Ivan Nazhivin. Lippincott Co. \$2.50.

Writing in the matter-of-fact, clipped style made so familiar by the younger authors of the Hemingway school, Romanoff analyzes the aimlessness of the intellectuals, after the revolution separated them from the old and established way of things in Soviet Russia.

The translator's preface asks what the author really thinks "of the state of affairs he so mercilessly describes." Without directly committing himself the author opens the mind and thoughts of representatives of the educated and professional class. Then calmly and detachedly, as though earthworms were being dissected, unrolls their anguished search for the "universal truth," for a "guiding principle" to fill up the "terrifying inner emptiness" of daily existence.

It is from this desperation as applied particularly to the women so situated, that the title is taken. A foreign moving-picture director who offers Tania a chance of advancement scornfully tells a group of her friends that "any Russian woman can be bought for three pairs of silk stockings." Romanoff is, of course, too subtle to mean this in a merely literal sense. It is not Tania alone, but all the educated castaways who try to catch up to the "spiritual life which had gone far ahead" of them. The daily squabbles and meannesses of home life, the tragedy to which it all leads clearly



SUNDAY MORNING

Mary O. Johnson