

Verbundkatalog Kalliope

In: The Chicago Sun Book Week. 21.3.1943, S. 3

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1943-03-21

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Grim Picture of Brute World Ruled By Violence and Insular Despair

Reviewed by
Klaus Mann

MEN FROM NOWHERE. By Jean Malaquais. L. B. Fischer. 316 pp. \$2.50.

JEAN MALAQUAIS is a Pole who went to Paris at the age of 18, joined the French army in 1939, and was taken prisoner by the Germans. He escaped, and is now in South America.

While fighting and suffering for the cause of France, he became a celebrated French author. His talent attracted the attention of such illustrious connoisseurs as Andre Gide, Andre Malraux and Roger Martin du Gar. "Les Javanais" (the French title of "Men from Nowhere") was a sensational success in France and England. Critics compared the newly discovered author to Gorki, Barbusse and Conrad. American reviewers stressed his resemblance to Faulkner, Steinbeck and Hemingway. They failed to mention that the main influences noticeable in Malaquais' style are those of the Frenchman, Jean Giono, and the Norwegian, Knut Hamsun—the two initiators and masters of the "blood-and-soul" mysticism so enthusiastically accepted in Nazi Germany.

This is how Malaquais writes:

"Ginette loved to rub shoulders with the menfolk—but that was all: no funny business. She liked to be where it smelled of mer-men drinking, smoking, scratching themselves. She enjoyed the odor of male sweat, of mustache, the whiff of pipes. And all these inhabitants of Java gave off a sort of peppery waft of straw mattress, wine and carbide which was unlike anything else; the amazing part was that they had no idea how good they smelled. . . ."

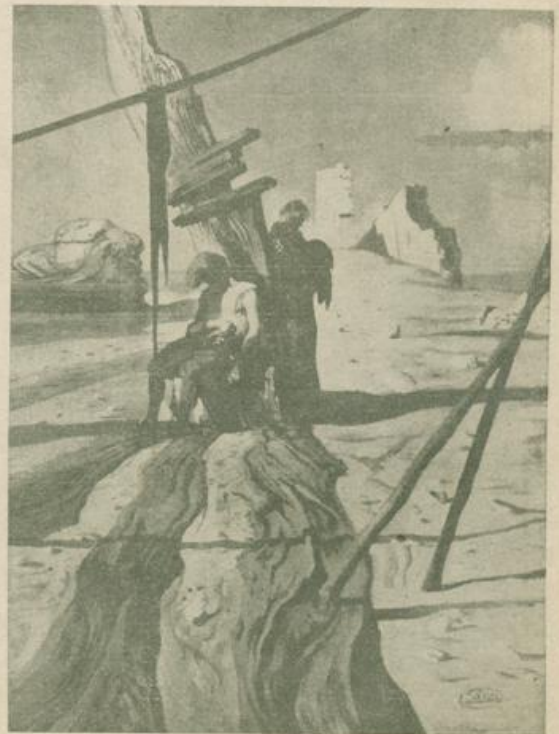
It has a familiar rhythm—this brutally virile idiom of the neo-naturalistic school, with its occasional overtones of primitive symbolism. "You could hear the sea, the woods, and the life of the woods; you could hear the wide world's pagan chant. . . ." Sentences of this kind sound embarrassingly like cliches: they might occur in the rhapsodic prose of any German Hamsun-imitator. This is not to say that Malaquais' style and vision are altogether hackneyed or second-hand. On the contrary, his book is rich in compelling images and stirring intonations; it's a grim, truthful tale of misery, passion and homelessness.

The heroes are a queer set of tramps settled temporarily on the shores of the Mediterranean, in the south of France—on a spit of land called "The Island of Java," because of its remoteness from con-

ventional, civilized life. There they work in the Sarcelle mine, under the management of a faraway English company. There they sweat, and swear, and commit crimes, and quarrel with each other—exploited, harassed, always insecure.

They come from nowhere and from everywhere—the hard-boiled cynics and heartbroken idealists who form the peculiar, desperate community. They come from Russia and Greece, Poland and Italy, Austria and Morocco. Some of them are descended from good families, like Hans von Taupfen, the German; others are frustrated intellectuals, like Dr. Magnus, a Ukrainian Jew. All of them are uprooted—a nomad people, bitterly experienced in all forms of persecution and wretchedness, but still possessed by a greedy, mystic hunger for new adventures, risks and ordeals. At times they seem almost happy—for instance, when they relax in Mme. Michel's "Baker's Dozen" bar or buy themselves a few minutes of sordid pleasure in the hospitable establishment of Esere. But more frequent and more characteristic are the hours of bleak depression, when the "men from nowhere" indulge in what their author calls "the usual mood of insular despair."

No doubt, their drama mirrors and symbolizes, in certain moments, significant aspects of a more gen-



From "Contemporary Art" (Crown).

Eugene Berman's "Napolitana."

eral tragedy—the sorrows of exile and deracination, the disgrace of poverty, the decay and disorder of an obsolete social system. On the whole, however, the grim and gloomy report fails to become relevant to our own experiences and problems. It remains whimsical, far-fetched, disconnected.

Jean Malaquais can do better. His is a great talent. He may write a great book, one day.