

A Fourth Mrs. Paterson

NEVER ASK THE END. By ISABEL PATERSON. New York: William Morrow & Company, 1933. \$2.50.

Reviewed by BRANCH CABELL

IN "Never Ask the End" Isabel Paterson has written a book which, in the first place, I declare to be very beautiful and humorous, and not a little perturbing. I then obey its imperative title. I ask only how many persons—in mere common fairness to her less protean fellow creatures—precisely how many persons, is Mrs. Paterson entitled to be?

I mean, that for a long while I have pleasantly encountered, in the *Herald Tribune*, upon Sunday after Sunday, that not especially Sabbatical Book Worm who (from her own unique worm hole, drilled delicately upon the border line between respect and derision) has made public, upon Sunday after Sunday, the travels, the teas, the wardrobes, and the post cards of the preceding week's literary geniuses; and who subscribes all such gay galimatias with her true, but her suspiciously apt initials, I. M. P. For an equally long while have I admired the signed-in-full book reviews of Isabel Paterson, those scholarly and at times profound appraisals, written, it would seem, by an elfin Ph. D. (after having considered her allotted book's author a bit over-appreciatively) with an aerially sardonic and an always faintly inhuman sympathy, expressed in quite solemn sounding sentences which yet—I do not in the least know how—contrived to twinkle.

Neither one of these two beings, themselves strangely disparate, could be made to fit in with that whole-hearted romanticist who wrote "The Singing Season," "The Fourth Queen," and "The Road of the Gods"—and who attained, in at all events this last-named book, to passage after passage of authentic thaumaturgy. It has been to me a puzzle, now for some years, why "The Road of the Gods" did not ever attract a proper fraction of the attention it merited. I pity any literate person who cannot delight in its fine hate story, enacted by the High Priest of the Cowyeth-An and Alethea, the Washer of the Dead, or who reads without suitable zest about the Council of Dusty Feet, or about the Men Who Danced Like Bears, or, above all, about the strayed wild Roman Legion, in rebellion against the Rome of Augustus Caesar, and wandering at loose ends over half Europe in quest of the fabled City of Salt and Silver.

All these affairs, I repeat, along with yet other splendidous matters which figure in "The Road of the Gods," appeared, to my color-loving fancy, to be distinctly gorgeous notions in the while that all these figments moved sparklingly among the gray magics of a Druid Wood, reared somewhere between Legend and Faëry. All these did I accept gratefully (in the fit romantic terms) as brave boons, and as guerdons, and as largesse bestowed by this third Isabel Paterson. I applauded her, in brief, as the most nobly endowed of our few surviving romanticists.

Well, and my reward is that this hitherto triune creature has now written "Never Ask the End," and has thus assumed a fourth avatar, which in no feature resembles any one of the other three. She has written a "modern novel" which puzzles me by its profound and its entire disconnection from all and each of her preceding appearances in print, and which moves me to inquire, yet again, just how many persons is Isabel Paterson entitled to be?

"Never Ask the End" tells of how three Americans, one male and the other two female, each one of the trio somewhere in the forties, each with a reasonably extensive and variously peopled "past," meet in Paris. One of the women, Marta Brown, has for a long while known both of her compatriots, but Pauline Gardiner and Russell Girard meet for the first time. The three get on together quite nicely, in and about Paris, in and about bed, in and about all matters. That, crudely and curtly and superficially, is the story of "Never Ask the End." That alone "happens" during the progress of the book. When I have said this much, all which is truthful, I



FIFTY years ago is always further away in its point of view than one or two hundred years back; it is more distasteful to us, more comic. Surface fashions change quickly, especially in dress, humor, and whiskers. Each new generation rearranges these simple disguises, and feels sure that such things are significant, and that they go deep.

It is hard to see Yesterday. When men write books about it they describe it minutely and accurately, but it is as though they were describing the cast-off skin of a snake. They laugh at this or that peculiar marking, they point out mottled spots. But they show us only the dry wrinkled skins. The live and handsome beings who wore them aren't in the museum.

Those beings were human. They were of the same species as the most modern Modern.

Clarence Day

have conveyed to you the most complete travesty of the book conceivable.

For in point of fact, the book is not concerned with these matters in any sense more serious than is algebra concerned with the letters of the alphabet, or than the parable of the Good Shepherd deals with sheep raising. "Never Ask the End," the fact gradually dawns on a discriminative reader, is instead a book about, "What



ISABEL PATERSON.

do men want, what do women want, of each other and of life?" And Mrs. Paterson makes yet more immediate this question (without ever dabbling in the unwisdom of attempting to answer it herself) by the adroit use of a technique which, in so far as I know, is new.

An admirer can but indicate the employed method of narrative by remarking here that, of what is done, of what is said, of what is thought, of what is felt, and of whatsoever too at that exact instant is recollected, by Marta or by Pauline or by Russ, all is presented, just as in human living it all does occur to human consciousness, simultaneously, and with the same irrelevantly distributed emphasis. Isabel Paterson has thus tried to present—actually for the first time, I believe—the actual mental and emotional and physical life of tolerably civilized beings as that life does actually appear (in, as the painstaking might phrase it, five dimensions) at each fleeting instant of life's actual existence. You may dismiss any such attempt, should you so elect, as a *tour de force*: but I prefer to call it a small masterpiece of dexterity. For the attempt succeeds.

It follows that this fourth Mrs. Paterson has made, in "Never Ask the End," a book which any tolerably civilized American must regard, throughout, with a sort of charmed squirming. In one of, as they say, a certain age, this book will evoke, I think, an amused and yet half-resentful sense of having been undressed (once more, a bit over-appreciatively) and then left naked, by a totally fair-minded person. Of those of us Americans, reasonably cultured, who have today reached responsible middle life, here is an honest portrait, all the honest will admit perforce. Thus, and not otherwise, have we lived,

from each moment to the next moment, during the most notable generation, it may be, and during the most disastrous generation, it is certain, in the world's history.

Today (now that "the grass is growing again over Liège"), today the consoling outcome is, that we oldsters are exceedingly well content to live on, for the rest of our granted while, weaving at every granted instant our five granted threads—of action, of speech, of emotion, of thought, and of recollection—into no Penelope's web, to be unravelled overnight, but into a pattern destroyed instantly, and recast instantly into another pattern no less inconceivably transient. Throughout some and forty years, we now know, we have done just this, and only this much, untiringly. And yet, "we had a good life," says Marta Brown, in the upshot. "We would very willingly do it all over again, and but hope to do it better."

For one does not really regret, at bottom, that this futile pattern-weaving, inside our own brain cells, has proved to be the utmost that life could amount to, so long as life yet endured in us "and the spirit still acknowledged its debt to the body for having served its joy." By the middle forties, in fine, one has perceived that these momentary fivefold patterns can, rather often, be made amusing or beautiful or even, in their own small way, instructive. One has seen that our human delight in them avails, day in and day out, to keep life an interesting and a fascinating kaleidoscope, and that it does reconcile us, each one of us, at well-nigh every instant, to leaving all human life unexplained. We obey, in short, the fourth Mrs. Paterson: we never ask the end.

I concede this freely. I commend these salutary morals. None the less do I demand of the welkin, with some such shade of resentment as is natural in a mere unit, just how many persons is Isabel Paterson entitled to be?

In a very special sense Björnsterne Björnson, whose hundredth birthday was recently celebrated, says Professor J. G. Robertson, writing in the *London Observer*, "is a national poet of his people, their representative man of letters in his generation. Indeed, at the close of last century when Ibsen loomed so large on the literary horizon of Europe, there was not a little resentment in Norway at seeing the lustre of his brother in arms thus dimmed and eclipsed."

Westward Ho

THE BRIGHT LAND. By JANET AYER FAIRBANK. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1932. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ALVAH C. BESSIE

THE reader who delights in no more than a good story will be more than amply repaid by reading Mrs. Fairbank's book; and he will get more. He will get a well-documented narrative of American life, covering the period between Jackson's administration and the Reconstruction (and the documentation, for a change, fits in the picture); he will move with the heroine, from New Hampshire to Galena, Illinois, with side trips to Boston, New York, Chicago, and New Orleans. Abbey-Delight Flagg made a runaway match because of her father—a petty domestic tyrant, and a type-specimen of that genus. With a husband she had met but three days before, she went west and literally grew up with the country. Those were stirring times: the Indians were almost on their last legs; Galena was a man's town superseding Chicago at that period, and Abolitionist talk was rife in the land. Stephen Blanchard was a man of his time; he made money hand over fist and a long life did not teach him how to manage it. Life flowed along; children were born and grew up; the Civil War broke out, their sons enlisted and their daughters felt the fascination of the uniform. When the war was over, Stephen went rapidly downhill—he was twenty years older than his bride, and as the novel closes, his children gathered symbolically from east and west to speed him on this last adventure.

It is a good tale not too well told, but the wealth of incident will hold the attention of the most exacting reader. Of style, Mrs. Fairbank has no inkling; the best that can be said for it, is its complete lack of pretension and a simplicity unmarred by affectation and unrelieved by a feeling for exactitude and inevitability of phrase. In motivation, it is startlingly lacking; it reads like a story the author had once been told, in all its multiplicity of detail—a story that "ought to be written down." At times, it is most naive, and we feel that the particularly ingenuous touches represent, unfortunately enough, conscious efforts on the author's part to achieve a more than temporal significance. Yet none of these episodes are unlikely, and in the hands of an artist, might have pointed up the narrative and lent it the significance of which its circumstantial nature strips it. Cases in point: the specious parallelism of Abbey-Delight's runaway match and her daughter's elopement; the reappearance of her long-lost brother in the guise of a river gambler on one of her husband's boats and, most pathetically obvious and awkward of all, the one "great respectable moment" of this dissolute brother, in assisting his intoxicated nephew—Abbey's son—on to the boat, which promptly blows up!

An interesting relic that was recently sold in England was the telescope used by Nelson at Trafalgar. It is inscribed, "Horatio Nelson, from E. L. H. and T. M. H., 1803," showing that it was a joint gift from Lady Hamilton and Captain Hardy. It was bought by a British firm for 1,450 guineas. Two watches, one presented to Nelson on the occasion of his marriage, and the other given by Lady Hamilton to the young sailor who killed the Frenchman who shot Nelson, went for 380 guineas.

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This Group of Current Books:

NEVER ASK THE END. By ISABEL PATERSON. Morrow.
Everyman, Everywoman, and life in a novel by I. M. P. of the *Herald-Tribune Books*.

THE GERMAN PHOENIX. By OSWALD GARRISON VILLARD. Smith & Haas.

The German Republic today and in its development.

THE WORLD ALMANAC.

The indispensable handbook.

This Less Recent Book:

CALL HOME THE HEART. By FIELDING BURKE. Longmans, Green.
A novel laid in the mill district of the South.