

Books of the Times

By NASH K. BURGER

ON a bright spring morning in 1915 an automobile careened at full speed down a winding Georgia country road, two men on the front seat, and on the back, "crosswise of the tonneau, the end of it projecting a foot or more on each side of the car, jostled and swayed the undertaker's long basket with the dead body inside." And as the car tore along, "on the running board stood another man, hanging to the car with one hand, holding the undertaker's basket with the other." The dead man was Leo M. Frank, defendant in a murder trial, storm-center of a racial and demagogic tumult that had aroused all Georgia. Frank had been lynched that morning. The man hanging precariously to the speeding car was Rogers Winter, a reporter on *The Atlanta Journal*, whose story of his wild ride and the lynching that preceded it is one of thirty-four outstanding news stories that make up Ward Greene's "Star Reporters."*

Not all the reporters whose stories are included here were quite as much in the midst of things as was Winter. But Winter's ingenuity, prescience and ability, his feeling for color and drama, are characteristics of most of Mr. Greene's "stars." Winter's piece on the lynching of Leo Frank is typical of many others, too, in that it is more than a reporting of facts. It is an arrangement and selection of facts that become social history. The cast of characters thumbnailed by Winter in his account of this lynching is truer and more representative than in many an entire novel about the South.

His 34 Stories Expertly Chosen

Mr. Greene did not depend on his own judgment or recollection in gathering his thirty-four stories. He asked a hundred newspaper men to make suggestions and worked up a list of nearly a thousand possibilities. Not surprisingly, some of the most highly recommended pieces failed to stand up, and too many were about death, natural or violent. Somehow the older stories impressed Mr. Greene more than the later ones. No two editors would have picked the same stories, but Mr. Greene's choices are all good. Certainly few books have gathered together so many famous journalistic names: Runyan, Mencken, Marquis, Cobb, Fowler, Brisbane, Gibbons, O'Malley, Rice, Pegler, Broun, to name but a few.

Here are stories of famous murder trials, of acts of God that snuffed out one life or hundreds, of great sport events, of revolutions, funerals and Presidential inaugurations. Here the Ku

Klux Klan is exposed; Lindbergh flies to Paris; a torpedo sinks the *Laconia*; Bryan faces Darrow at Dayton, Tenn.; Billy Sunday preaches a sermon; John Dillinger is mowed down outside a Chicago movie house. The stories in Mr. Greene's collection are given their proper setting and background by the brief explanation he has written for each one. Thus we know why Henry Morton Stanley happened to be wandering around in Africa looking for David Livingston. We also get such incidental information as that Stanley fought with both the Northern and Southern Armies in the Civil War. Mr. Greene, in short, has done a good deal more than just throw thirty-four newspaper stories together.

Early Accounts Are Emotional

Despite his professed efforts to the contrary, Mr. Greene's collection is long on crime, the wages of sin, and death. Two of the most harrowing stories concern famous catastrophes that claimed many lives: Winifred Black's story of the Galveston storm and tidal wave that killed thousands, and Lindsay Denison's account of the burning of the excursion boat *General Slocum* in New York's East River. Winifred Black was one of the earliest and best women reporters, and she was the first reporter, man or woman, to get into Galveston. Her emotion-packed story of what she saw in that devastated Texas city in September, 1900, is typical of the older pieces in "Star Reporters"—all stops are out, sentiment and emotionalism form a swelling, double chorus. Even Irvin S. Cobb, reporting the Harry K. Thaw trial in 1907, illustrates this earlier manner.

The more recent stories tend to present their material flatly, in unabashed detail, leaving the reader to supply his own emotional response. This is notably the case in Gene Fowler's extremely graphic account of Ruth Snyder's execution, and *The San Francisco Examiner's* story on the lynching of two kidnapers at San Jose in 1933. This change may also be noted in Dudley Nichols' reporting of the Pig Woman's appearance on the witness stand at the Hall-Mills murder trial and, to a lesser extent, in the remarkable pieces written by William Burke Miller on Floyd Collins, trapped in a cave in Kentucky. Something of an exception is F. A. Behymer's piece on his childhood inspired by Mary Margaret McBride's "How Dear to My Heart." Mr. Greene, once a Georgian, has even included that classic Georgia short story "Eneas Africanus," by Harry Stillwell Edwards—his excuse probably being that it is told as a series of letters to the editor. Well, it's a good story. And Mr. Greene has put together a good book, one that many readers, and any newspaper man, will enjoy.

*STAR REPORTERS. Edited with notes and introduction by Ward Greene. 410 pages. Random House. \$3.