

A Parable of Buried

ATLAS SHRUGGED. By Ayn Rand.
L168 oo. New York: Random
By GRANVILLE HICKS

THIS Gargantuan book comes among us as a demonstrative act rather than as a literary work. Its size seems an expression of the author's determination to crush the enemies of truth—her truth, of course—as a battering ram demolishes the walls of a hostile city. Not in any literary sense a serious novel, it is an earnest one, beligerent and unremitting in its earnestness. It howls in the reader's ear and beats him about the head in order to secure his attention, and then, when it has him subdued, harangues him for page upon page. It has only two moods, the melodramatic and the didactic, and in both it knows no bounds.

That such a book finds an enthusiastic publisher might be hard to understand if its author were not Ayn Rand, author of "The Fountainhead." There were twelve publishers, so the story goes, who rejected "The Fountainhead," and when it appeared in 1945 most reviewers were distressed by its crudeness and sentimentality; but it was a best seller and more than that, for it won disciples as well as readers. And since Miss Rand can say that "The Fountainhead" was "only a prologue" to "Atlas Shrugged," she and the publisher have reason to believe that a public is there, ready and waiting, even for a book so long and so expensive and so inopportune as this.

The scene is the United States, and the time is the future, a future vaguely defined but in most respects like the present. What is important about this future, we learn, is that the national economy is declining in a mysterious way. Miss Rand shows us this decline through the experiences of the heroine, Dagny Taggart, descendant of railroad builders and the real head of Taggart Transcontinental, though her brother James has the title of president. Spiritually she is close kin to Dominique Francon of "The Fountainhead," and she performs Herculean labors to keep the trains running in spite of the incompetence of her brother and virtually all her associates and subordinates.

SHE finds an ally—and eventually a lover—in Hank Rearden, a steel manufacturer who is her equal in intelligence, determination and sense of responsibility. Theirs is a losing battle, however, not merely because they are surrounded by greedy incompetents but also because the few competent men in the country, the men on whom they could count, are vanishing.

The vanishing is what the book is about. As the reader soon gathers, there is a conspiracy on foot, a conspiracy of the tiny minority of able, creative

men in the country. Refusing to be exploited any longer by looters and parasites, such men are withdrawing their talents. They know that society will collapse without their services, and they have become convinced that it must collapse if a healthy social order is ever to exist. Their leader, whom we finally meet on page 701, is John Galt.

The conspirators, as we come to see them, are all admirable men, clear-thinking, resolute, brave and, invariably, distinguished in appearance. The looters, on the other hand—politicians, bureaucrats, labor leaders, self-styled intellectuals, manipulators of businesses—are mean-spirited, cowardly creatures, with flabby faces and repulsive bodies. Miss Rand shows them to us in their offices and their homes, at parties, in trains and on street corners, and always she visits her scorn upon them.

WE are in a world like that created by Mickey Spillane, where "they" are evil and must be destroyed. "They" are numerous, however, and it takes time to get rid of them. Dagny Taggart and Hank Rearden refuse almost to the end to accept Galt's plan of sabotage, even though they have been subjected to the supposedly irresistible logic of the conspirators, and even though Dagny has visited the headquarters of the conspiracy and has fallen in love with John Galt. Their almost inexplicable stubbornness prolongs their dual struggle against the looters and the conspirators and occasions the variety of incidents that keep the story going.

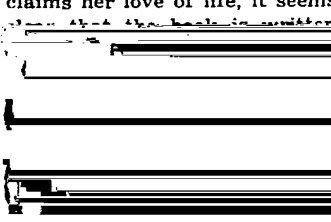
The author's moral would seem to be implicit in her story, but she has left nothing to chance. Many speeches are

Talents

scattered through the first part of the book, and when Dagny stumbles upon their Atlantis, each of the conspirators "testifies" for her benefit. Then, as we draw near the climax, John Galt makes an address that goes on for sixty pages. Galt glorifies reason, denouncing both mysticism and relativism, and proclaims the sacred importance of the creative individual. His associates spell out some of the practical consequences of his gospel: abolition of the income tax, for example, return to the gold standard, an end to foreign aid, an end to social welfare legislation.

IT would be pointless to discuss either the logic or the feasibility of the program Miss Rand so vehemently puts forth. What is important is the spirit in which the book is written. Like "The Fountainhead," "Atlas Shrugged" is a defense of and a tribute to the superior individual, who is, in Miss Rand's view, superior in every way—in body as well as mind and especially in his capacity for life. Its spirit, regardless of the specific doctrines it preaches, is calculated to appeal to those who feel that life could and should have more meaning than they have experienced.

Yet, loudly as Miss Rand proclaims her love of life, it seems



out of hate. How well Miss Rand hates is suggested by the end of "Atlas Shrugged." After John Galt's speech

Renaissance

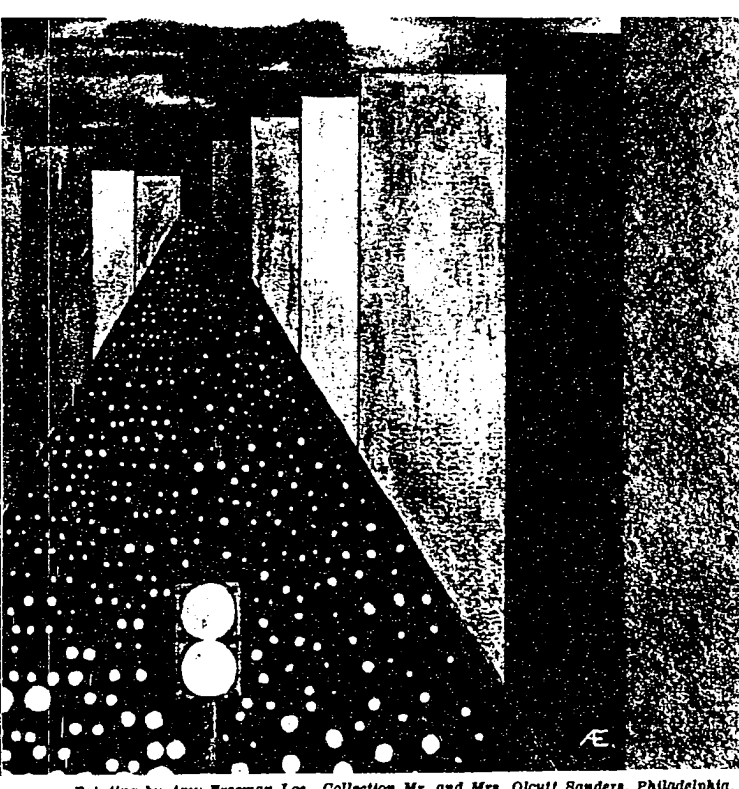
DARKNESS hid the ruins of a continent: the roofless homes, the rustling tractors, the lightless streets, the abandoned rail. But far in the distance, on the edge of the earth, a small flame was waving in the wind. It seemed to be calling and waiting for the words John Galt was now to pronounce.

"The road is cleared," said Galt. "We are going back to the world."

He raised his hand—and, over the desolate earth, he traced in space the sign of the dollar.—"Atlas Shrugged."

lights of the cars were darting through the streets, like animals trapped in a maze, frantically seeking an exit, the bridges were jammed with cars, the approaches to the bridges were veins of massed headlights, glittering bottlenecks stopping all motion, and the desperate screaming of sirens faintly reached to the height of the plane. * * * It took them a moment to realize that the panic had reached the power stations—and that the lights of New York had gone out."

Thinking of the holocaust implied by this paragraph, one remembers Ignatius Donnelly's "Caesar's Column" and Jack London's "The Iron Heel." But the destruction Donnelly and London described—not without relish—was trivial compared with the disaster Miss Rand so cheerfully envisages. Perhaps most of us have moments when we feel that it might be a good idea if the whole human race, except for us and the few nice people we know, were wiped out; but one wonders about a person who sustains such a mood through the writing of 1,168 pages and some fourteen years of work.



Painting by Amy Freeman Lee. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Olcott Sanders, Philadelphia.
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"The lights