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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

The Valley Below. Alice Marriott. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1949. Pp. 243. \$3.00.

In *Maria: The Potter of San Ildefonso*, Alice Marriott wrote sensitively and often beautifully of the life of a people alien to her. In order to be near her work at the pueblo, she set up housekeeping with Margaret Lefranc, artist and creator of fine illustrations for *Maria* and this present book, in a Spanish-American valley community nearby. *The Valley Below* is an account of their life in that community, the humorous approach dominant, the serious present too, to make an interesting blend. To say all this so solemnly is a little foolish and foolhardy, for Miss Marriott, in having a thoroughly witty time, has thrust now and then at the solemnities, even those of her profession, ethnography.

In the first part of the book she takes us humorously, even hilariously at times, through the discomforts and mis-haps of refurbishing an old 'dobe house, dealing with an earnest but inept handyman, controlling a houseful of irrational Siamese cats, getting water out of a perverse well and equally perverse well experts, battling the eccentricities of a coal and wood stove, negotiating the intricacies and doubts of house-buying, getting peace and sleep during the nocturnal debates of rights to irrigation water, the purse-emptying, house-crowding mania for pottery, the trials of building an addition to the house. There has been some method in this approach. Chapter XIII begins: "Now I seem to have reached the point, according to ethnological custom, where I must go beyond the household and its dwelling, and define and describe the surrounding community in relation to the specific unit." So the latter half of the book, maintaining the humorous approach, though with less dominance, deals with the social life of Indians and Spanish-Americans, ending in a series of well-told little stories of the neighboring Maclovio Salazars, and a sensitively felt story of the Penitentes. Thus the book that began "with the idea of an orderly description of a society" became one "about a house and its being lived

in, and about some of the people who came and went there." It traced also a change in the two women. "The impersonality of being moderately successful, urban, professional women was gone from us. We were women, and our neighbors came to us for help because they knew we would understand and would give it."

There are some things one regrets about this book, regrets them because Alice Marriott writes so well. Despite her own denials of success in portraying a society, a good deal of understanding does come through, but it has to make its way through the convention that controls the book. The convention goes something like this. An urbanite, feeling decay in the city, indeed in his own culture in general, turns to "the simple life." He does not do it with the whole-hearted romanticism of, say, a St. John de Crèvecoeur. He sees some of the lighter ironies and laughs at his own discomfiture. The *Atlantic* used to run sketches of this sort for its urban readers, and still does occasionally. And *slick* humor uses the idea. The convention has many extensions. Sometimes the adventurer not only finds the natives inept, costly, but lovable, but is himself a competent, self-reliant person who may with ingenuity control the situation. As long as this happens, we get more of the narrator than of the native. Miss Marriott's first chapter starts off so thoughtfully, in such finely-woven prose, that one expects more objectivity than he gets. The humor, as I said, is lively, and understanding comes through. But the enigmas of alien ways, that we would like to solve rather carefully, remain incompletely penetrated. One would like to see Miss Marriott try a serious approach in fiction, something like that of Katherine Anne Porter.

University of New Mexico

E. W. TEDLOCK, JR.

Apron Full of Gold. Edited by Rupert Glass Cleland. The Huntington Library, San Marino, California, 1949. Pp. IX, 99. \$3.50.

The book consists of a series of letters, between 1849 and 1856 during the gold rush period, written mostly by Mrs.

Mary Jane Megquier to her children back in Maine. Her husband was a physician wishing to improve his financial position. Mrs. Megquier decided to accompany him, having heard that in California there were opportunities for women also to acquire large incomes. Her husband and two others invested \$10,000 in galvanized iron sheets for a building 26 x 40 together with drugs and other goods, all to be shipped around Cape Horn.

The Doctor and his wife took the shorter route by way of Panama. The details of the trip, as related in the letters, are most interesting. They left New York by boat March 1, 1849, and reached Chagres by March 13. In a few hours after their arrival they started up the Chagres river in a small steamboat with thirty canoes attached. After a few miles by steamboat, they were to make the rest of the water trip in these native boats. Three of the tourists with a native crew got in one boat twenty feet long and two feet wide to go to Gorgona. From here they went on horses to Panama, where they arrived March 24.

By May 20, 1849, they were still in Panama together with about 2,000 others waiting for transportation to California. The doctor practiced medicine here, making almost enough to pay their expenses. They arrived at San Francisco June 16.

By September of the same year they had accumulated as much as they would have made in Maine in two years. The doctor practiced medicine and ran his store, while his wife kept from sixteen to twenty roomers and boarders.

For a period of eight years after their arrival, these letters describe the life in San Francisco as seen by a couple not interested in the adventure of gold mining. The conditions, such as the types of people, cost of living, nature of amusements, and the social life are presented by a hard working and intelligent woman. The reader gets a presentation of the reaction of a new arrival in a wild frontier mining town; at first there was a feeling of loneliness and homesickness, later a sense of satisfaction and enjoyment. While she missed her children back in New England, there

were frequent statements that the locality was no place for children.

The book is another snapshot picture of a most interesting period, and a work valuable to the historian as a bit of source material for a larger view of an important national event. The general reader will certainly enjoy the letters, so real, so vivid, and so unpretentious.

University of Arizona

H. A. HUBBARD