

THE YOUNG DISENCHANTED

By Gerald Hewes Carson

WITH the young *révoltés* in the saddle, romance seems almost to have vanished from the United States. One of the last citadels has been the college—that happy make-believe world of song and color and liquor and boon companionship evoked by the moonlit fancies of George Fitch, Owen Johnson, and, more recently, Meade Minnigerode. F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1920 indicated the new approach when he turned a cynical, searching eye on the undergraduates of Princeton. Now come Lynn Montross and Lois Seyster Montross with “Town and Gown”, like “This Side Of Paradise” a first book, to complete the demolition of the romantic formula.

Thirteen short “episodes” make up “Town and Gown”, the episodes each being a quick, authentic character study, each conveying a sharply delineated bit of atmosphere. The cumulative effect is neither fragmentary nor slight. “Town and Gown” is the representation of a complete little

microcosm, presented with skill and minuteness and a point of view steady and disenchanted.

Mr. and Mrs. Montross learned, at the University of Nebraska and the University of Illinois, respectively, what Mr. Fitzgerald observed at Princeton—that the college world is remarkably like the great outside world in the elements of its humanity, in its beauty and passion and struggle and ugliness and aspiration and frustration. Yet at Illinois and Nebraska this similarity was even more pronounced. For there they had the girls, “several thousand young virgins with knee-conscious skirts and rouged ear tips and rolled-down stockings and bobbed hair and plucked eyebrows and baby stares and affected lisps and a terrible frankness.” And after them “several thousand men students who roared about in high-power, low-slung automobiles apparently in an endless pursuit of the several thousand young virgins.”

Six of the thirteen episodes, then — “The Fusser”, “Girls Who Pet”, “The First Man”, “Bass Drums”, “The Strangest Serenade”, and “A Blind Date, Cousin Lottie and the Cat” — treat of the passion of love in its highly specialized, coeducational phases, ranging from the light mood of a comedy of manners, through flirtation and flirtage to a sketch of such elemental and tender undertones as “The First Man”. The style is smart, neat, indeed often brilliant, and so evenly maintained that the dual authorship of the episodes passes unobserved. The predominant mood is indicated in the philosophy expounded by the undergraduate heartbreaker: “College is a hard, sordid, practical kind of place ’nd petting is its substitute for romance.”

The faculty is done up in three little

stories: “The Faculty and the Creaking Shirt”, which tells of the rise of the spirit of youth in an assistant dean of English chaperoning a fraternity dance, and how it was baffled; “Dry as Dust”, a rarely intuitive study of the mind of an academician; and “Bass Drums”, a daring rendition of the sex complexes of a dean of women.

Mr. and Mrs. Montross, in their own heightened and telling way of putting things, have indicated that the cynical interpretation of college life is the true one. Young college alumni still in the sentimental stage will resent the touch of caricature; old alumni, with that special disposition for direct, immediate interference which old alumni always display, will peremptorily demand a course in spanking for the adventurous, cynical young people of “Town and Gown”. If, however, the sentimental objectors will look closely into “Peter Warshaw” and “Girls Who Pet”, they will find that this picture of life at the alma mater is much more balanced than they had supposed. They will find in these young people the travail of creative desire, the restlessness of intellectual questing, and the chaos and incoherence and tempest out of which come maturity and effective power. In suggesting that the younger generation as it graduates from college today has a lively spirit, inquiring mind, and adult emotions (as well as the inevitable smartness and sophistication and cant of the incurably adolescent) Mr. and Mrs. Montross have noted facts which are significant, and which apparently entirely eluded the observation of all their predecessors who have sat down to turn their collegiate years into fiction.

Town and Gown. By Lynn Montross and Lois Seyster Montross. George H. Doran Company.