Noted With Pleasure

Horsing Around in Paris

In Paris in the 20's the journalist Harold Stearns borrowed money on the pretense that he had a race horse to support. This is from "Four Lives in Paris" (North Point) by Hugh Ford.

Many regarded the story of the filly that Stearns had either bought, won, or inherited (no one ever found out exactly how it had come into his possession, if indeed it ever had) as apocryphal. Strangers who heard Harold describe the animal's merits had no reason to suspect that it might be imaginary and gladly contributed to its upkeep. And even the suspicions often found his account of the filly's training so convincing that they convinced themselves that perhaps it really did exist after all. After a while Stearns stopped talking about his horse. Others talked, however, and their explanations tended toward hyperbole. Some went so far as to say the horse had committed suicide. But one night in the Sèlect, George Selfes and a group of Harold's friends heard the story of the filly's death from the grief-stricken owner himself. He told it brilliantly. Selfes remembered, creating "a little epic of effort and heroics and devotion" that held them spellbound. After describing how he had nursed the ailing animal through its last days, Harold paused, raised his eyes to his listeners, and said softly: "She died in my arms."

The thesis apparently amused not a few of the delegates: they laughed somewhat indecently at some of the learned speakers' illustrative anecdotes. What is more, he was constrained to laugh, at times, himself, and so the whole transaction took on a jocosity that was appropriate but disconcerting. But for all his eloquence he could not make it thrilling, and the fact became horribly apparent the moment he discharged the name of the candidate. It is the custom at national conventions to hold back the name until the last instant, and then to snap it out dramatically, for the sound of it is the signal for the formal demonstration to begin. But this time, for the first time in political history, no demonstration followed.

The Minor Leagues of Literature

Because of the expense of taking care of his brain-damaged son Noah, Josh Greenfeld never felt free to try his hand at art for art's sake. In "A Client Called Noah" (Holt) he reflects rather wistfully on his literary career.

No one ever sets out to be a minor writer any more than any would-be baseball player pictures himself winding up as a utility infielder. I remember as a boy growing up in Boston and Brooklyn I couldn't understand the Sibby Sistis and Whitey Wietelmanns, the Oscar Melillos and the Johnny Hudsons, the fifth infielders who would rarely get to play. I marveled at their patience in sitting out game after game on the bench. I knew I would have angrily slammed my glove to the dugout floor and gone home. How could anyone with the talent to reach the big leagues settle for a substitute — or minor — role? Yet that is the role I have settled for. I've never been anything but a minor writer. And unlike a Sibby Sisti, who became a wartime starter, I have never been a starter at all. A minor writer waits for assignments, a major writer makes his own waves.

Mom at the Keyhole

Wallace Stevens had one of the most individual voices in American poetry, and he kept it unsullied, he says, by refusing to read other poets. This is from "Secretaries of the Moon: The Letters of Wallace Stevens & José Rodriguez Feo" (Duke University), edited by Beverly Coyle and Alan Filsfis.

You are wrong, by the way, in thinking that I read a lot of poetry. I don't read a line. My state of mind about poetry makes me very susceptible and that is a danger in the sense that it would be so easy for me to pick up something unconsciously. In order not to run that danger I don't read other people's poetry at all. There seem to be very few people who read poetry at the finger tips, so to speak. This may be a surprise to you but I am afraid it is the truth. Most people read it listening for echoes because the echoes are familiar to them. They wade through it the way a boy wades through water, feeling with his toes for the bottom: the echoes are the bottom.

The Jocose Nomination

Here is H. L. Mencken, one of the great mischievous makers of American journalism, reporting on the nomination of Coolidge in 1924. It is quoted in "Menchen and Sara: A Life in Letters" (McGraw-Hill), edited by Marion Elizabeth Rodgers.

Mother love is not a uniform instinct, but a highly idiosyncratic affair. In his novel "Loving Little Egypt" (Viking), Thomas McMahon shows a mother spying, first suspiciously, then ecstatically, on her nearly blind son.

She wondered whether his weak-sightedness might allow a ruse. Once in a while it crossed her mind that he might be so wicked as to be pretending it all. Frequently she observed him through a keyhole. Once, she even left the house, banging the front door, and stood on an inverted bucket to see him through the window of his room. On that day, he was playing on his bed with wooden toys. One of the toys fell from the bed and lay on the floor out of his reach. His thick eyeglasses covered half of his face. The lenses exaggerated his eyes the way