

The General's Romance

THE BRIGHT SWORD. By Eleanor Perényi. 309 pp. New York: Rinehart & Co. \$3.50.

FOR years Civil War books have touched on the ill-fated courtship of the Kentucky-Texas General John Bell Hood and the glittering "Buck" Campbell of the great rice-planting clan. In the Southern caste system of the Eighteen Sixties, the romance was one that intrigued a great many people. Of two far different worlds, the pair met in the spotlight of wartime Richmond, while some grinned and others clicked tongues.

The Baroness Perényi (whose mother is novelist Grace Zaring Stone) is a native American, daughter of a Navy officer, who knows her Old World courts. She has a sharp social perception, a resourceful understanding of formal interplay. Few have caught so brilliantly the

kind of court held by Varina and Jefferson Davis; she evokes so well the brittle atmosphere that it is almost like reading the famous "Diary from Dixie" with a sharpened perspective.

The author has another gift, growing perhaps out of her family's military background—that of handling the behavior of men under the strain of campaign, in the testing of battle. She contributes memorable reenactments of the raging battle of Chickamauga, of the later clashes in Georgia and Tennessee.

The time is the growing twilight of the Confederacy, when Jefferson Davis clashed with the man he hated, Joe Johnston, and elevated the young Hood to a place in which no soldier, perhaps, could have succeeded. Madame Perényi's portrait of Hood is a winning one, that of an unbrilliant, puzzled, eminently likable man confronted by a series of unhappy choices, personal and public. Her "Buck" Campbell emerges in a telling likeness, though the glamorous one seems basically a negative miss, probably worthy of a bit less trouble than she caused Hood and others. In a sense the story becomes one long frustration for poor Hood; one measure of the writer's gifts is that she makes it so fascinating.

Not many first novelists have achieved so professional a beginning as this one. "The Bright Sword" is a fictionalized re-creation of fact that deserves a wide reading, both North and South.

HARNETT T. KANE.



3/6 - '55

