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A Western Sans Hero

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A Western Sans Hero

JOHNNY CHRISTMAS. By Forrester
Blake. 278 pp. New York: William
Morrow & Co. \$3.

By HOFFMAN BIRNEY

THE last few years have produced several noteworthy contributions to frontier fiction, but this first novel by a veteran of four years' service with the Eighth Air Force is keyed to a different—and more somber—note than most such narratives. The action covers the decade from 1836 to 1846. Johnny Christmas, in his own words, was "a hot-tempered kid without a brain in his head," and the ten years did little to cool the temper or to supply the brains. He and a score of companions raid a Mexican village in western Texas and are pursued and defeated by a mixed force of Mexicans and Comanches. The survivors win through to Bent's Fort, on the Arkansas, and the novel's only plot develops when Johnny finds his roan horse freshly branded "U. S." Lieutenant Mackey, an arrogant dragoon, refuses to return the animal and Johnny swears to kill him.

He keeps that pledge ten years later when Mackey enters Santa Fe with Kearny's army of the West. In the meantime he lives with a band of Utes; he traps in the Bayou Salade; he marries a Ute girl and leaves her and their baby daughter. He visits California and has sundry adventures in and around Taos. There is no romance in his marriage or elsewhere in the book, no heroism or derring-do in his encounter with Montoya and the Penitentes; no gain of spiritual strength from his contacts with the Franciscan fathers in California.

AND yet the book is provocative—decidedly so. There must have been many a Johnny Christmas among those who followed Stuart and Henry, Lisa and the Choteaus, Jed Smith and Old Bill Williams. They were the restless ones. They, like Johnny, were followers and never leaders. They sought beaver, but rich furs did not satisfy them, nor, in a later day, did gold. They accepted wealth as casually as they did women or liquor. Restless, questing, they roamed the unknown mountains and followed unknown streams, driven inexorably by the urge to see that which lay beyond the most distant peaks. Attainment brought no satisfaction. There were always more mountains against the blue horizons.

Those who seek romance will find "Johnny Christmas" disappointing. Nor can it be defined as adventure or as historical fiction. Its pattern is as unconventional as Johnny himself, a composite of all those restless ones whose names no history or contemporary diary records. It was they who found Mosca Pass and Cochetopa and the High Tanks. Men who called themselves pioneers followed them. Therein Mr. Blake's novel is notable and praiseworthy.