

**THE SAN DIEGO UNION
SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA
18 SEPTEMBER 1932**

BOOK REVIEWS

LAUGHING TORSO

By Nina Hamnett

Nina Hamnett was born in 1890 into a regulation English army family. Until she was old enough to escape, she lived in constant rebellion against the restraint and propriety of the household. She decided when still quite young to become a painter and at 15 she began her study at the Dublin School of Art.

No better example of what is commonly called the artistic temperament could be found than Miss Hamnett, for both in her virtues and her vices she exhibits the true Bohemian excess.

James Joyce called her one of the few vital women he had ever met and expressed in one word the central trait of her character. Every page of her memoirs bespeaks this astounding vitality. She is apparently never quiet, but moves constantly from one activity to another. Anything remotely approaching monotony bores her acutely and she is so much dependent upon the stimulus of social contacts that once when she had to spend a week-end entirely alone she became so lonesome that she contemplated suicide.

Her restlessness, combined with a genius for making friends, has brought her into contact with almost everyone of interest in Paris during the last 20 years. The pages of her book are encrusted with brilliant names. Among her intimate friends she has counted Henri Gaudier Brezska, Jean Cocteau, Augustus John, Roger Fry, Brancusi, Aleister Crowley and many others. An enumeration of her acquaintances would read like a Who's Who.

"Laughing Torso" is a collection of anecdotes and colorful bits of information about these celebrities. Of Gertrude Stein she mentions that "she wore in winter thick grey woolen stockings and Greek sandals. The stockings had a separate place for the big toe, as the sandals had a piece of leather which went between the big toe and the other four toes. She

sat with her legs crosses, and the sandal on the crossed leg dangled and swung from her big toe, to and fro; it never stopped swinging for an instant." She tells how Arthur Rubenstein and Heifetz went to a night club incognito and played Hungarian dances until the crowd was in tears.

Such is the material of her story. It is lively, engrossing reading, provided only that one is interested in the persons talked about. The anonymous characters are without exception a dull lot because Miss Hamnett does not succeed in conveying personality. She has other limitations, and serious ones, in that, she has not the least bit of reflective or analytical power, and in her choppy style. There is not a single penetrating judgment in the entire book and probably no eliminating detail. Her concern is entirely with appearances and occurrences, so that what she has to say is essentially chit-chat.

She is no more critical of herself than of others with the result that although the incidents reveal a changing and developing character, Miss Hamnett offers the reader no commentary on the development. In about 1910 she was going around in the daytime dressed in a clergyman's hat, check coat, and skirt with red facings, including the button-hole, which was faced with red too, wearing white stockings with men's dancing pumps and being delighted when people in Tottenham road stared at her. Today she says of her clothes "all my women friends were most thoughtful and kind and realized the importance of clothes, consequently I always looked well dressed. If one is smartly dressed, even if one lives in a garret, one can always ask more for one's pictures."

As a young student in the Latin quarter she was proud of having no English or American friends before the war, but lately she has met apparently hundreds of college boys, middle west families and eastern plutocrats and found them all charming. If she had spoken of herself from some consistent point of view instead of using the purely objective factual approach, one cannot help but feel that her own personality would have emerged much more clearly than it does.

In spite of its shortcomings, however, "Laughing Torso" is an enticing boo.—Jane B. Ford.