

SLAVERY AT NOON

Our fourth bestseller take-off this fortnight is the controversial 'Freedom at Midnight', a book that sold the maximum hardcover editions in India in the past ten years.

SLAVERY AT NOON by Harry Rollins and Feminique Rapierre. Published by Lucas. 555 pages, Rs. 55.

★ The authors attempt to present fiction as pulp history. Rollins and Rapierre will make good grandfathers and their latest book, *Slavery at noon*, should more suitably have been titled "Bedtime Yarns".

The book is supposed to take up where Harriet Beecher Stowe left off, and if you can afford to spend the money, I suggest you buy it and marvel at how a 20th century Uncle Dick's Cabin ought to be written.

Slavery at Noon is based on 72 hours of taped interviews with the last surviving slave in America. This slave's name is Arthur MacArthur, and his father fought under Douglas MacArthur at Guam and Manila.

Arthur is a fake, and you know it after reading only three dozen pages. He's not a Negro, he doesn't live in Virginia and slog at picking cotton, and Abe Lincoln would have called off his Emancipation if he'd set eyes on Arthur. Arthur was enslaved at 12 noon on the 25th of March, 1954, when he signed the marriage register at the Town Hall in Chicago.

Arthur's slave mistress is his wife, Emma, 40 and childless. Emma is a shrew and a nag, and Arthur is a latter-day Jack Sprat who can eat no lean. *Slavery at Noon* purports to be a record of Arthur's marital life, and it is here that Rollins and Rapierre reveal their mastery of the tall story. Not surprising, considering that Rollins is a Texan, and Rapierre a clown in a French circus. The authors claim that Arthur was so unsure of his ability to maintain a wife that he summoned his best friend, Charles 'Corny' Younghusband, to an emergency meeting on the eve of the nuptials. Younghusband had been married for five years then and was more experienced at managing a wife. Arthur asks Younghusband to marry Emma, since Corny is a Mormon and thus polygamous. If



Corny makes a go of it, Arthur decides, then he'll marry Emma himself. This revelation in *Slavery at Noon* has created a sensation throughout America, and readers have written to Rollins and Rapierre to ask since when women in the USA can be polyandrous. ★ The authors have obviously distorted facts to fit into the framework of a slick story, and at one place they've even implied that Arthur was carrying on a homosexual affair with Younghusband. Younghusband died in 1970, and his son David has sued Rollins and Rapierre for defamation of his father's spotless Mormon character.

The 72 hours of taped interviews with Arthur appear to be a fabrication, since they exaggerate his role in his marriage and reduce history to tantalising ifs and buts. For example, in Chapter 6, the authors say, "If Arthur had decided to be strict with Emma right from the first day of their marriage, he wouldn't have been reduced to such abjection today." And "But Arthur is essentially weak-spined. He lacks his father's soldier blood, and he is effeminate and ineffectual in all his transactions, sexual or capital."

Slavery at Noon has definitely made a big impact on the history of marital incompatability. Masters and Johnson,

Kinsey and Freud, and Germaine Greer crop up with clockwork regularity in Emma's speech. Emma is a radical Libber, subscribing to SMUT (journal of the Society of Manufacturers of Unisex Trousers). She's also secretary of HAH (Husbands Are Heartless) and she thinks Arthur is impotent and imbecilic.

Apart from analysing the MacArthurs' unprogenied existence, Rollins and Rapierre also take a look at the general status of husbands in America today. And in the final chapters of the book, they reproduce the testimonials of one hundred men approaching their silver wedding anniversaries. Each letter details the feelings of the men on the wedding night, the anticlimactic hopelessness of a nagged soul, and the consensus that if Darwin was right about Evolution, women will develop into sexless Female Chauvinist Sows by the end of this century.

Slavery at Noon thus succeeds in jerking the average American out of a smug existence interrupted by Billie Jean King and charred bras. It makes good reading, if one can disregard the impudence that the authors display in making fun of the Last Slave in Chicago.

— CHAITANYA KALBAG