

A "Sympathetic" Fiction

BLACK RIVER, by Carleton Beals. Lippincott. \$2.50.

Carleton Beals ought to have known better than to write this book. Attempting to novelize the story of America-and-oil in Mexico, he has produced a narrative in which a twisted sense of historical values is heightened to the point of absurdity by his clumsiness in working with the novel form. The stupendous facts of his source of material strain through pretty threadbare invention, and what presumably was intended as an indictment of imperialist greed becomes merely an inexperienced exercise in cheap sensationalism, in the manner of the worst Hollywood racketeer scenarios.

Black River is the story of CEMOC—the Calumet East Oil Company (Yankee-owned)—which, before and during the Carranza period, rode the crest of the wave on the mighty rivers of Mexican oil. CEMOC sunk oil wells—and poured gold into the laps of foreign industrialists, statesmen, murderer-generals, with the attendant small fry of government land agents, stool pigeons, thugs, and camp-followers. CEMOC sunk oil wells—and seized lands, fought rival plunderers, financed revolutions, shot down peasants and workers. CEMOC (and its English rivals) despoiled Mexico, expropriated the Mexicans. And prominent in the foreground of the pic-

ture was a certain General Yarza, a thinly veiled caricature of the notorious Manuel Pelaez, who during the days of Carranza maintained his separate bandit regime in power in the Tamaulipas oil regions, financed by the foreign oil magnates.

Mr. Beals manages to transform his material into a gaudy tale of foreign adventurers, prostitutes, drunkards, and natives, who are either naïve and gentle or utterly depraved. The essential character of the period as one of agrarian and anti-imperialist revolt is entirely missed, extraordinary as this may seem. One expects a man like Beals to go astray in his estimate of the Carranza and Obregon movements, but that he should fail to see the Mexican peasant and working masses as anything but a piteous object that history kicks around is after all a little surprising. Under such circumstances his implicit attitude of "sympathy" for an exploited people is actually offensive.

MANUEL GOMEZ.