

## As Gorky Told It

*My University Days*, by Maxim Gorky. New York: Boni and Liveright. \$3.00.

MAXIM GORKY'S capacity for vivid biographic narrative was well displayed in his reminiscences of Tolstoy. In the part of his autobiography, which he ironically calls *My University Days*, he has created a story that, with a slight change in focus, might have been one of the remarkable novels of the year. It is a tale of picaresque adventure among a hundred queer personalities—suspicious and violent peasants, queer disrupted students, policemen who spoke unconsciously the doctrines of Nietzsche and czarist officials who exhibited a gruff respect for the young writer, revolutionaries whose melodramatic appearance was almost a caricature of reality, and humdrum people suddenly disembowelled of an inward characteristic and made significant. It is a carnival of the miserable and the dejected. No English-speaking writer since the eighteenth century, save perhaps Barrow or De Quincey, has presented such a picture.

Here is anything but what an ordinary man of letters would have to record of his university days. Needless to say, Gorky is not quite an ordinary man of letters; needless to say, he did not go to a university; nor did he, like the narodniki and the later Tolstoyans "go to the people." How could he? The push of circumstance set him plump in the midst of them. Forced to earn his scant living as a baker's helper, a boatman on the Volga, a nightguard on a railroad, Gorky exhibited that high and impetuous courage which comes with adolescence, or not at all. Surrounded by the savagely illiterate, he fought for the saving humanities; beset by the drab bawdiness of weary men and women, he became fiercely chaste; tortured by the unending pettiness and immediacy of physical existence, he turned to the life of the mind and asserted his faith in disinterested intelligence.

It was a gallant fight and a great victory. A weaker spirit would have become cynical at the shivering contrast between the ideal and the actual; but if the sad emptiness that overtook Gorky once led him to attempt suicide, it did not weaken the fibres of his mind, and he was graduated from this grim university with an idealism fortified by common sense, and a tender good humor. If he saw the drabness and futility of the common life, he had felt its fine moments too: there is a keen passage that exalts the work of the boatmen loading a barge on the river, moved by a common natural rhythm, a description that could have been written only by one who had shared in the work and felt it to his marrow. Much of these experiences went into his stories; but what remains over is still significant and precious.

One is tempted to extract a hundred anecdotes by which Gorky lights up the phantasmagoria of his youth. The narrative has both the inconsecutiveness and the poignant relevancy of Chekhov's plays—except for the fact that Alexei Maximich never entirely learned to follow Chekhov's advice to prune away the luxuriant underbrush of adjectives which sometimes almost conceals the trail of the sentence! Better, however, than any particular good bit is the sense of being constantly in the presence of a mature and tempered mind, tolerant, understanding, and just; a man who discovers without derision the weaknesses of a friend and reveals without reserve the magnanimity

of an enemy. If there was bitterness in this phase of Gorky's life, it has been sweetened in memory: Gorky has told of the disillusionment of his first mating with a tenderness that takes nothing away from the acrid smell of reality.

One suspects that *My University Days* is written in glowing prose; but unfortunately the translation does its best to conceal it: it is literal to the point of being scarcely literate. "The line of settledness" is not the English equivalent for the pale; nor does the Russian phrase, "sail like hares" convey more than the English stowaway; nor is a notable man a "noticeable" one: yet almost every page exhibits these painful departures. There should be some sort of legal or moral restitution for the injury done to a work of art through mistranslation; and were it in order, the anonymous translator of *My University Days* would suffer a heavy penalty.

LEWIS MUMFORD.

## Fiction Notes

*The Comely Lass*, by Thomas Moulton. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. \$2.50.

A NOVEL that, unencumbered with complexity of plot, goes simply and with an overwhelming certainty straight to its inevitable conclusion, has a charm and power peculiarly its own. From this tale of English harbor folk, Thomas Moulton has shorn every vestige of unrelated incident. Yet having done this, he uses the single, pure, narrative theme as a vehicle for an artificial unnecessary element. His sense of formalized poetry leads him to hale his characters out into the open, wantonly to apostrophize them. Although the sheer, wistful beauty of many of these passages seems at times easily to justify their presence, a greater restraint on this one point would have been mother to a more vigorous, more nearly perfect, craftsmanship.

R. B. F.

*The Passionate Year*, by James Hilton. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company. \$2.00.

THE title misleads. The passion of the author for wearisome descriptions of unrelieved conjugal bickering is far more apparent than any consuming emotional content in the story itself. The triangle stuff is rung in, with no extenuating vigor or freshness. Upon the loss of her husband's affections the wife drowns herself with an infinite if startling solicitude. The widower and his new beloved fade from the reader's indifferent view, both of them a little shamefaced about the death that is to make their union possible, but none the less busy assuring each other that the awkwardness will soon wear off. And so, in this slightly unsavory instance, it probably will.

R. B. F.

*The White Ship. Estonian Tales* by Aino Kallas, translated from the Finnish by Alex Matson, with a foreword by John Galsworthy. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. \$2.50.

TO the reader of imagination these tales from a little-known part of the world give a new and delightful experience. Neither in content nor in technique are they in any way comparable to our commercial short-story product. They constitute a genre of their own, with an atmosphere and a technique interestingly between those

of the Russians and of the Scandinavians. In some of the stories there is a great theme dominating the vivid life portraiture; but in all, the essential humanity of these strange people is conveyed to a remarkable degree. It is pleasant to be able to add that the translation is idiomatic and does not interfere with the artistic impression.

E. R.

*So Big*, by Edna Ferber. New York: Doubleday, Page and Company. \$2.00.

ON a canvas of smaller dimensions than that used for *The Girls*, Miss Ferber has painted the portrait of Selina and her son, "So Big." It is Selina, glowing pioneer in spirit that she is, who occupies the light-filled foreground; while the boy from whom the book derives its title, in contrast seems small, shadowy and far-away. And, with Miss Ferber's measuring-stick, how almost unnaturally insuperable does the distance between foreground and background appear.

C. N.

*Epithalamium. (L'Epithalame)*, by Jacques Chardonne, translated from the French. New York: George H. Doran Company. \$2.50.

THIS book, winner of the Northcliffe prize as the best French novel of 1922, and now appearing in English in an excellent translation, may be described as a novel which makes no compromise with marriage. The author is resolute in his apparent desire to make a wistful tragedy out of a commonplace enough French romance which has in it, like Maria Chapdelaine, something of the idyllic and something of the sentimental. In style it is admirably calculated toward subtlety.

J. G.

Through an inadvertence The New Republic neglected to state that the comment on the Treaty of Disarmament and Outlawry of War published with the treaty in our issue of July 16 was prepared by the Foreign Policy Association, New York City. The treaty and comment have been published as a pamphlet by the Association for distribution on request which should be made to 9 East 45th street.

## Contributors

J. W. OWENS, a writer on political topics, is on the staff of the Baltimore Sun.

PRINCESS ELIZABETH BIBESCO is the author of *I Have Only Myself to Blame* and *The Fir and The Pine*.

LEONIE ADAMS is a frequent contributor of verse to The New Republic.

MARIAN STORM is the author of *Minstrel Weather* and a book of essays.

LOUIS UNTERMAYER has published a number of volumes of poetry, the most recent of which is *This Singing World*, an anthology for children.

ROLFE HUMPHRIES, whose poems appear in current periodicals, is one of the editors of *The Measure*.

BABETTE DEUTSCH among other things has written *Banners*, a volume of poems.

GEORGE O'NEIL is one of the editors of *The Measure*.

ERNEST BOYD, journalist and critic, is the author of *Ireland's Literary Renaissance*, *Appreciations and Deceptions* and *The Contemporary Drama of Ireland*.

THEODORE COLLIER, professor of European History at Brown University, is the author of *A New World in The Making*.

LEWIS MUMFORD is the author of *The Story of the Utopias*.

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