

# BLUE EYES

M E L V I N   W A L K E R   L A   F O L L E T T E

SHE HAD BLUE EYES—like the heavenly blue flowers of the Santa Barbara ceanothus, like the mantilla from Andalucia, like bluejays. Her blue eyes came from a time when blue eyes were rare in California; from the time her great-great-grandfather governed that fabulous province in the name of the King of Spain. In those days, you could always tell an aristocrat: the peasants had the eyes of dogs, brown as the dung they groveled in; the Indians had eyes like cisterns, black and bottomless; but to her were the eyes of a doña, the blue eyes, the fair skin, the hair dark as roasted coffee, sweet to the smell as cinnamon bark, so enflaming, once, to the passions of thin-hipped, elegantly-shouldered men. Her hair had turned to yellowish-white, her skin was liver-spotted and folded in dewlaps over and under the arch of a fine chin, but the eyes were still blue, as blue as ever, although now she wore steel-rimmed spectacles, a humiliation she would have never endured in youth. She still maintained her hostility towards them, and hid them on the rare occasion someone came. She hid them now, in the secret pocket of her brocaded coat. The coat had come to San Francisco by China clipper in her mother's bridehood, but now the dainty pink cherry blossoms and moonlit bridges were smeared with dirt and age. The familiar sound of the bronze Basque herdbell summoned her—she had taken it from her father's house when she married, and she had brought it back again when her husband died. Her father and mother were already dead; her son was dead; her granddaughter, Theresa, was gone; she was alone.

At the servant's entrance, a young man waited. She peered at him through the lattice. He stood quietly, open faced and sandy haired, his great basket in hand, clad in a white coat. The white

coat had earlier in the day been freshly starched; now it lay limp to his body. It had gotten stained with blood, and smelled of meat. He flinched, expectantly, when she opened the door.

Why are you late? My pets are hungry. Is the meat cut fine enough? No gristle, I told you last time, no gristle. And no bone! My birds can't eat bone, they choke. You killed my prettiest bluejay. Yes, you. He choked on a bone. I found him dead. You killed him. Go. Get out. I'll send a check to the butcher himself. I won't let *you* have my money. (She paused to prepare an insult.) You *trash*. (As he set down the basket and sauntered toward the garden gate, she flung a final epithet after him, adding a "God" to her "damn.") *OKIE trash!*

As soon as his back was to her, she reached out her glasses, her eyes followed the butcher's boy. He fumbled the latch on the gate, and a great-crested blueblack bird lunged at him, swept past his face, lunged again, fearless, furious, that the boy was empty handed. The boy ducked and fled to his white truck, leaving the gate ajar. The bird screamed after him, and all at once there was with the screaming bird a multitude of his screaming fellows. In the brief moment of the butcher boy's retreat, the garden had filled with birds. Down from the dark, piney Los Gatos hills they swarmed, demanding to be fed. There were jays in the pepper tree, jays in the sweetly poisonous oleanders, jays in the cypress, jays perched at all angles on the wall—a rampart ten feet high and just as thick between her and the rows of identical huts where the peasants squatted, with their gaudy Chevrolets and Oldsmobiles, their ugly television aerials, their horrid children and their horrid cats. The jays alighted on the iron spears that topped the wall, they balanced themselves on the jutting

hunks of glass which had been embedded in the concrete to shred the hands and legs of intruders, to shield her sanctuary from destructive children and marauding cats.

SHE WENT INTO THE KITCHEN with the meat basket, and scrupulously divided the contents into thirds, against the weekend, because it was Friday, and there would be no more delivery until Monday. Within the dusty pantry was an old meat cooler; the rancid odor of decay flooded out, as she laid the new supply of meat on top of the shrivelled scraps of previous batches. Even in that dark interior, the sound of the birds penetrated, loud and demanding. She hurried back into the kitchen, picked up the day's ration, and went forth into the garden. With arms amazingly strong and steady, she heaved the meat scraps into a central plaza, which was flanked on one side by a shrine. The birds descended; they squealed; they fought. They tore at the greyish-pink scraps of meat with their powerful beaks, they ripped at the meat with their pointed claws. And the old blue eyes looked with delight on the bluejays eating.

She had withheld a few choice morsels, and now her favorites came to claim them. She held out an empty hand, and one of the birds lit on it, his claws firmly but tenderly dug into her liver-spotted flesh. With her free hand she cautiously but steadily advanced a bit of meat toward his waiting beak. He seized the chunk and shot into the sky, and the force of his beating pinions almost threw her down. She laughed. Soon the birds were satiated, and began to disperse. A few hangers-on, the weak and the slow, scratched wistfully for a time among the flower-beds, but eventually they, too, fluttered away to their roosting places.

Her blue eyes looked westward, attracted by something glowing. The sky above the Santa Cruz mountains had assumed the archangelic radiance of winter days, an hour or so before dusk. The light was playing through the broken clouds, far above the dark mountains, the light existed as pillars, and streamers, and shafts, the darkling clouds were transmuted into light. The light made her garden glow.

The back of the shrine of St. Francis was to the

north, so that the front and side-wings would catch the ultimate of sunlight at whatever season, whatever time of day. St. Francis had been her father's pride; he always took guests there first, before the sherry, before the conversation. The mosaic decorations of the little shrine had been made by a young Mexican laborer, who had lost a hand in an accident, rendering him unfit for work in the vineyards. The priests at the mission had taught him to use his one good hand for the glory of God, and after he had filled the mission with more terra cottas of God's mother, more images and mosaic ikons of the saints than the grounds could hold, he began to receive calls, and go out to work for private parties. She remembered him dimly, but recollected that he had talked to her once, kindly, when she was a little girl. But later she had learned that he had no business sense, and was a tool of the priests. He had refused a commission to make a mural of the harvest of Bacchus for a wealthy vintner; he would depict only God's mother and the saints. Furthermore, he turned over to the priests all the money he made. And they in turn gave him a hut beside the poultry house to live in, and the added privilege of feeding corn to the hens. Her father had once asked this queer man why he did not keep the money for himself—he could be rich, he could go to the East, make a pilgrimage to Rome. He had replied in his simple-minded way, shaking his jet-black head of hair, blinking his brown peasant's eyes, and hiding his withered arm, that the money was not his but God's.

ST. FRANCIS stood in his brown frock, his angular bare feet firm among crocus and iris, one hand to his side and hidden, the other stretched firmly out, a bluebird nestled in his palm, a halo of green swallows and goldfinches about his head, a hummingbird next to his flecked beard. They were like burning in the gold light, the saint and the songbirds, but her blue eyes regarded them coldly. She went into the house; she had never liked the shrine, although she had to admit that it made the perfect place to feed her bluejays.

The stupid butcher boy had come late, and it was past tea time. She lugged the heavy kettle to the sink and filled it half full with water, then

returned it to the stove. Children were playing, somewhere down the street, outside the perimeter of her sanctuary. She could hear their singsong voices as they taunted one another in their games. The kettle was making noise, but probably had not boiled yet. She took off the lid to make sure, and her glasses steamed; she wiped them off on her skirt, replaced them and looked outside, as if to test them. She winced.

A tomcat, attracted by the smell of meat and blood, was sniffing at the stained marble before St. Francis' shrine. She viewed the animal with loathing. He was alert and muscular, with thick-set legs and short, tight fur, striped in ruddy orange. The light outside had begun to fail, but she saw him clearly, and she knew what she must do. She hurried to a nearby closet and removed the double-barreled shotgun that had been her son's. She did not load it; it was already loaded; she kept it loaded at all times, for contingencies like this one. She opened the window; the cat had not moved. She took aim, her blue eyes steady ahead, her arms steady, too. She squeezed; squeezed again; the kick of the weapon threw her back against a cupboard, but she did not fall. The cat was still in the same place, but now he was dead. The arm of St. Francis appeared to stretch out over him in a ludicrous benediction. The sounds of the children had ceased. There was no traffic in the street. The neighborhood was calm.

With the light step of a young girl, she went into the garden. The enemy lay limp, teeth clenched, in a pool of blood and excrement. She picked him up with loathing, for he was still dripping, warm and damp, and flung him into the incinerator near the wall. She replaced the grill and wiped her hands on her skirt. She waited in the garden in a state of high excitement.

Through the new calm came the thin, wavering call of a little boy: "Here, Rufus, here, Rufus, kitty Rufe, kitty Rufe, kitty Rufe!"

Then silence. Then the voice again, thinner still, but nearer: "Here, Rufus, here, Rufus, kitty Rufe, kitty Rufe, kitty Rufe!"

Then silence.

And now, she went back into the house, but only to turn off the gas, and to pick up the flashlight which lay on a shelf on the verandah. She

hid among the azaleas and waited. Her foot hurt; she had injured it when she fell against the cupboard. The silence was broken again.

"Here, Rufus, here, kitty. . . ."

The voice was closer.

She heard steps.

The gate creaked.

Dimly, through her old blue eyes, she perceived a dark form as it slid along the flagstones of the garden path. Her flashlight was ready, and just as the form reached the shrine, she switched on the light. A blond, blue-eyed boy, who was perhaps eight or nine years old, was transfixed by the sudden brightness. He hunched toward the shadows, his skin the color of light toast, finely freckled, his thighs quivering under his tight Levis. She glided toward him, the light preceding her. What do you want?

Frightened into politeness he gasped. "Please ma'am, I'm looking for Rufus, my cat. Have you seen him?"

You're a naughty boy. Cats eat birds. They are wicked animals.

Then the air turned. He had got his bearings. He grew defiant. "Ya, ya," he hissed. "Bluejay witch, bluejay witch! My dad says you're cracked!" The young blue eyes, lucid, transparent, mocking, looked up at her old blue eyes, but she stared back, she stared him down. He lost his courage, grew afraid again.

Get out. Your cat's not here. But if I see him, I'll kill him. Get out! Get out! The boy bounded toward the open gate and left it swinging after him. *Okie trash*, get out! The Okies had ruined California, they had ruined Theresa, they would ruin her if she couldn't keep them out. Flashlight in hand, she groped her way to the gate and securely bolted it. The stupid butcher's boy had left the gate open—no wonder the trash had gotten in. Her foot hurt badly now; she must have sprained her ankle. She paused to train the beam of light on St. Francis, and it gave her pleasure to see that the tiles were pocked by scattered shot from the gun; furthermore, the piece of greenish tile that had been St. Francis' eye had been knocked out. She chuckled. Then her bad foot slipped in the pool of blood and excrement that the cat had left, and the flashlight smashed on the marble and went out.





WHEN SHE OPENED HER EYES, it was to the grey dimness of a high morning fog; she was aware of light, but not of sun. She could distinguish no objects. Gradually, she realized that she was in pain; from her right hip to her right ankle her leg throbbed, the rest of her was without feeling. The fog grew thinner; the brightness of the objective sun rounded itself at her; but she was cold. She was so terribly cold, she was sure that the cold must have made her numb. The sun began to warm her; but she was still numb. Her eyes still looked into chaos. Of course. Her spectacles were missing. She had dropped them in the fall. Perhaps she could locate them; she tried to twist her neck; the pain overcame her. But little by little she managed to turn, until the points of color that danced in the obscurity told her that she was facing the little shrine of St. Francis. She strained her eyes, strained hard, and she could detect a glimmer like sun bouncing off the steel rims of her glasses, somewhere beside her. If only she could reach them. Why not? Why was she lying here anyway? Why didn't she just get up? The butcher's boy would come. She would have him find them for her. The idea contented her, and she relaxed for a moment, gathering the strength to pull herself up. But she could not raise her body; she could not move. She tried wriggling her toes. She could wriggle the toes of her right foot, though it hurt her when she did. She could not feel the left, nor move it. She gradually perceived that her left arm was pinned under her back, and that she could not feel it, and that her right arm lay outstretched, in the direction of St. Francis, in the direction of the precious spectacles. She struggled hard, finally did manage to wriggle an inch closer, but her strength gave out, and the light left her.

The bluejays were angry. She could tell by their voices. How intimately she had known them, the lovely birds, the only things in the decadent, disintegrating country of California that were pure. The bluejays had never been angry with her, because she loved them, because she cared for them, tended their needs, defended them from predatory cats. She heard the bluejays, although she could not see them, and she knew that her friends were there. They were there to celebrate the picture she had painted, their lovely por-

trait. In those days she had gone to Mass every Sunday, and holy days, too, and remembered the saints. Her teacher was horrified that a young girl should want to abandon still life—she remembered the broken pitcher, the rotting fruit, “such lovely shapes” he had said in his fake French voice—her teacher was horrified that she wanted to paint saints, but she had her way. Her St. Francis did not look stupid with a bunch of songbirds like he did in their garden; he was virile and racy with part of his strong breast showing, and he held no bluebird but a beautiful bluejay in his outstretched hand. “It’s indecent!” her father said, and the painting teacher was dismissed. Why, father? Why . . . ? Why . . . ?

The bluejays were angry. Why should the jays be angry, when she loved them so? They were angry with the Okies; with the Okies’ children; with the Okies’ disgusting tomcats; with their young men. Theresa was in tears, and she in rage. Of course I read the letter, you idiot. I’ve always read your mail for your own good. “You had no right.” The blood of the Sepulcro and Cristo-cruce flows in my veins—in yours, too, more’s the pity—and you take up with an Okie, under my very eyes. My own granddaughter. “He isn’t an Okie. He’s from Wyoming. And what if he were an Okie? What difference would that make?” He’s trash! Do you hear me, *trash! Okie trash!* “He goes to Stanford; he has a scholarship.” Okie trash. And you’re Mexican trash. Your mother ruined you, as she killed my son. “That’s not true, grandmother. She loved him. She loved me, and she loved you, too, even though you wouldn’t let her.” Get out of this house, you Mexican whore, you daughter of a Mexican whore. Go squat in a hut with the peasants and have your bastard. Get out of my house! Puta. Doors slammed. Puta. . . .

THE BLUEJAYS WERE ANGRY. And they grew angrier, as the afternoon progressed. She marked the progression of the afternoon by the sun, which had sunk down so low in the west that the wall and the shrubbery completely shaded her, and she was cold. The pain was strange, it came and went, and though sometimes it might be hot, she was always cold. She shivered and was wet. The pungent odor of her own excrement

came up around her, nor did it offend her, because it was her own. The odor excited the birds, who were hungry for the scraps of meat that she fed them daily. They had grown voluptuous under her tender and loving care; they did not wish to seek elsewhere for their carrion. They demanded to be fed.

The bluejays swept toward her, they glanced off her, they gathered in blueblack clouds above her, they shrieked, they hollered. The butcher's boy had not come with their daily supply of meat. Why? In a clearer moment, she comprehended all. Yesterday had been Friday and today was Saturday and tomorrow would be Sunday and not until Monday afternoon would the butcher's boy come. Not until then would he find her. But surely, someone would come before that. Theresa? Even she had to laugh. The Mexican slut had been gone—was it eleven, no, twelve years—and probably was squatting like a doe in a rabbit hutch, bringing forth squealing blond blue-eyed children, images of that disgusting man. Perhaps the neighbors would worry and come in. Worry? They would be glad if she died. Ever since they had tried—and failed—to have her declared a public nuisance in court, what could they do? The country of California has fallen on evil days, when a Cristocruce can be hauled into court by Okies. Perhaps the boy would come back to look for his cat. She thought not. She was sure that she had frightened him away for good. A blur of wings whipped over her failing eyes. Perhaps a priest would come. Ha! She had told the priests off years ago. And besides, on Saturday night, they would be hearing confessions.

The bluejays had given up in disgust, and had flown to their roosts.

The pillars of light had dissolved in the western sky. Her eyes could collect no more light.

Bless me, father, for I have sinned.

"Venial or mortal?"

Mortal.

"How, my child?"

I let a man have his way with me.

"A young man?"

Yes.

"Does he love you?"

Yes.

"Will he marry you?"

Yes.

The penance the priest had given her had been light, a few verses she could not remember now, but the words of advice he had given her came back to her. "Remember, my child, that flesh is flesh and that spirit is spirit, and that the sins of the flesh are easy to detect and easy to confess because they are outward and visible, but the sins of the spirit are inward and invisible, and they are not easy to confess, because they are not easy to know. Examine yourself carefully; are there no more sins to confess?"

None, father.

Her reply was quick and firm. Some matters are personal. Why should she tell the priest that she had prayed to St. Francis, hoping that she would get pregnant, so she could force the young man to marry her? Didn't all young girls do the same? What is love, anyway? She loved him well enough in her way. She loved the idea of his being her husband, and she the wife of a Cristocruce, the blood of the Sepulcro and the Cristocruce united at last. How proud she was when she married him. For fifty years she had carried the words of the priest in her heart, and she had never understood them. Not even now.

Something slimy crawled over her forehead; had she not been benumbed and immovable, she would have flinched. It explored the arch of her brow, crept down between the eyes, and entered a nostril. For the first time since she had lain there, her whole body tingled, felt alive. She sneezed. Whatever the creature had been, it had got dislodged. She felt it no more. She felt nothing for a long time.

WHEN SHE OPENED HER EYES to another morning, she could not even discern the fog; but she knew it was morning, because the bells were ringing to summon the faithful to Mass. Cars drove by in the streets outside, and children ran down the sidewalk, heelplates clattering. She had given up the idea of trying to reach her glasses. She had tried and tried but she could not get near them. She had given up the idea of being discovered by someone else. She would just have to wait for the butcher's boy. She was resigned to wait. A

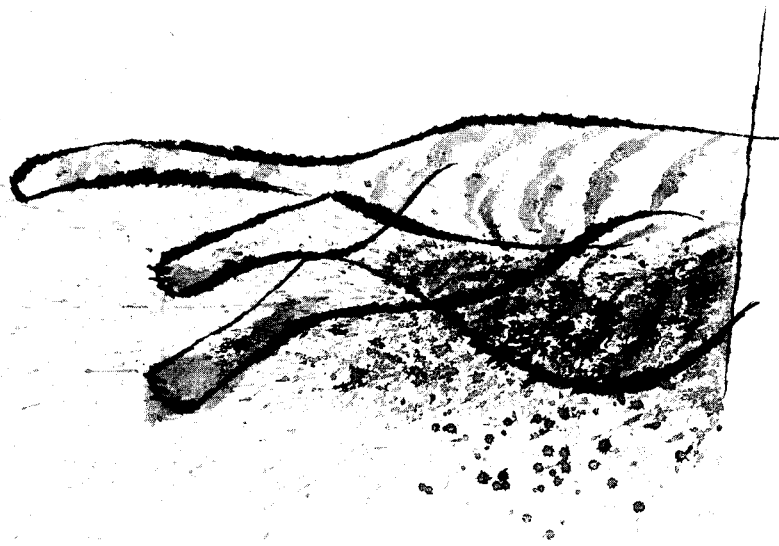
lady had fallen on evil days, who had to wait for the charity of an Okie to be saved. . . . The birds returned. . . . The birds would save her. Had she not given them much? Would they not give her much in return? She had cast her bread upon the waters; she had thrown her meat into the shrine of St. Francis. She had shot their enemy, the cat. The bluejays hovered in the trees, and she thought on the Holy Ghost and the birdlike nature of it. But the Holy Ghost had descended like a dove. A pigeon. A stupid dirty pigeon. How much more holy, how much more ghostly, if it were bluejays instead. The jays flocked over her, and their wings fanned her fevered face.

Hour after hour, the bells sounded hour by hour. Each time they grew louder, lasted longer, as noon approached. She had lost count, but she heard the bells sound long this time, and she knew it was noon. The honey-like fragrance from the heavenly blue flowers of the Santa Barbara ceanothus was gently carried to her nostrils by the upspringing breeze, and she took it for incense, she was the center of her own worship, the blind St. Francis would be her priest, the congregation squawked approval from the trees. It was her confirmation, and she had pranced and minced before the mirror, touching the new swellings beneath the tatted bodice, as she had felt the ethereal stuff of her white skirt and reveled in it, her aunt had said: "Barbara, you are proud; you are too proud. This is God's hour, not yours. The Holy Ghost will not descend if you are proud." But as if to

contradict her aunt, she had felt a tremendous glow at the moment when the Bishop laid his hands on her head, and she knew that her aunt was wrong. As the priest had been wrong later. As all the stupid religionists had been wrong from the start. . . .

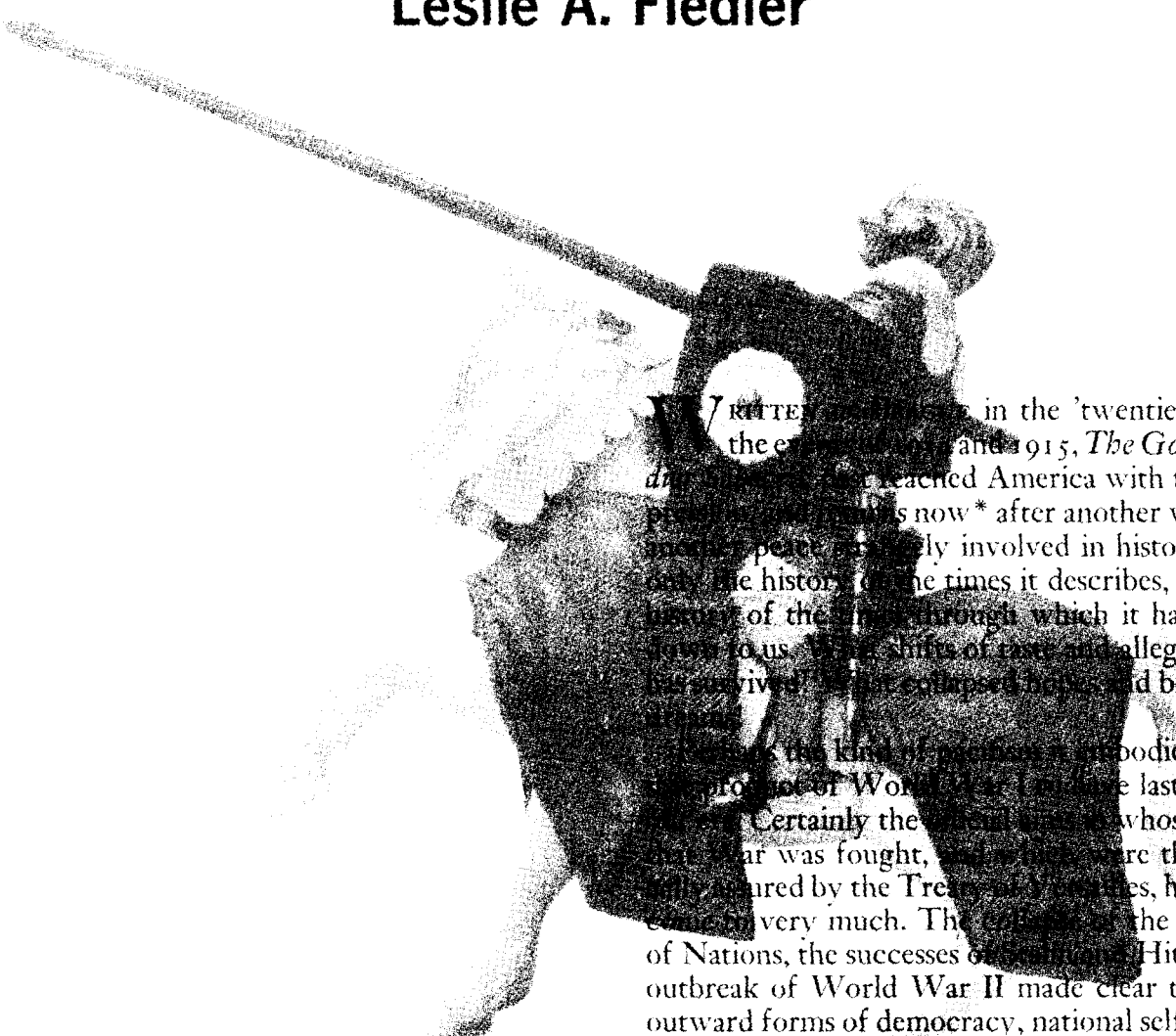
From time to time her eyes caught glimmers of things. She fancied she saw the neighbor boy, peering through the bars at the top of the gate, but she could not be sure. She could scarcely have seen that far, even with the aid of her spectacles, and she did not have them and she could not reach them. But the image remained, the small mouth sneering, the blue eyes staring. . . . The bluejays were angry. . . .

The bluejays were indeed angry. They had gone a whole day and part of another without being fed. They boomed through the air like gigantic bees in search of an elusive honey; they came closer to her; some perched at her thighs where the rich smells were. One of the bluejays alighted on her forehead, and embedded his claws in the thin flesh. Thin and wrinkled though it was, beneath the flesh was blood. The blood began to flow, first a trickle, then a rush—it flooded the cavities where the blind eyes stared. The pain was nigh unbearable, but she bore it, as she had borne all the past affronts to her sensibility that an evil environment in a decaying country had conspired to produce. A strong beak was plunged into the pool that once was blue. And even then, she steadfastly refused to cry.



# The Anti-War Novel and the Good Soldier Schweik

Leslie A. Fiedler



Written in the 'twenties about the end of the first war, and in 1915, *The Good Soldier Schweik* reached America with the Depression already under way. It is now \* after another war and another peace, deeply involved in history: not only the history of the times it describes, but the history of the times through which it has come down to us. What shifts of race and allegiance it has survived! What collapsed hopes and betrayed dreams!

Perhaps the kind of pessimism it embodies is the direct product of World War I, but it has lasted into the '60s. Certainly the idealism whose name that war was fought, and whose were theoreticallly assured by the Treaty of Versailles, have not come off very much. The collapse of the League of Nations, the successes of Hitler, the outbreak of World War II made clear that the outward forms of democracy, national self-determination and international cooperation, imposed by fiat or invoked in piety, had little to do with the inward meaning of the world after 1919. Not peace and order but terror and instability were the heritage of the postwar years: an institutionalized terror and a stabilized instability, in whose honor two minutes of silence were observed for

\*A paper-back edition is to be printed by The New American Library early in 1963.