

Kaleidoscopic Russia

THE BYSTANDER. By MAXIM GORKY. Translated by B. G. Guernsey. New York: Jonathan Cape & Harrison Smith. 1930. \$3.

Reviewed by ALEXANDER KAUN

IN the original, Gorky's last novel bears the title of "Klim Samgin," and the subtitle of "Forty Years." Therein we see his double purpose: the delineation of the main character in the story, and the portrayal of the last four decades of Russian life.

Some four years ago, on an amethyst-golden Sorrento afternoon, Gorky read aloud a fragment from "Klim Samgin"—the ballad of Christ giving a "perpetual" ruble to Vassily the drunkard. Gorky is a fine reader, and the impression was obviously powerful. Yet his eyes of a sad old dog looked around eagerly, and he anxiously pressed for criticism. He explained that this novel was to be his ultimate test as a writer. One recalled, however, that thus he had regarded more than one of his former works, until they were written and dismissed from his mind in favor of the next "ultimate test." Gorky has never enjoyed the quiescence of one who has arrived, and even now, when he is past sixty, he is youthfully impatient with his attainments.

He spoke on that afternoon, and on succeeding ones, of his plan to weld the history of the last forty years of Russia, "as he knew it personally," with the inner growth of his fictional characters. One noted, though, that of the former he talked less readily, with less of a creative joy, than of Klim Samgin, of Lydia, of Varavka, of the other multitudinous inventions that people his novel. It seemed, then, strange that Gorky whose strength lay in reproducing the factual, the personally experienced, should feel more sure and at ease with his imagination than with his experience. One may understand this better now, after reading two completed volumes of the novel and the first chapters of the third, appearing now in "Zvezda" (by the way, though in three volumes, the novel is not a trilogy, as the "Nation" reviewer misstates).

What Gorky has set out to write is not a historical novel, in the sense in which "War and Peace" is one. Tolstoy had no difficulty in blending his Rostovs and Bolkonskys with Napoleon, Alexander, and other historic personages, because they all belonged to a more or less crystallized past. Gorky has faced the task of presenting one of the most eventful periods in Russian history, of which he has been a contemporary, and a dynamically participating contemporary at that. He has felt the lack of perspective and the impossibility of complete detachment in treating events and social currents of such personal concern and proximity. It was necessary to efface himself as a biased observer, and to find a substitute in Klim Samgin, an antipathetic character endowed with cold skepticism and analytic objectivity. "The Bystander" is therefore an apt title for the English version of "Klim Samgin," though Gorky is not responsible for its choice.

Through the eyes of this substitute we are made to watch the bewildering Russian panorama, not in its cosy remoteness, but as a disconcerting immediacy. We miss the comfort of a historical novel, in which everything has been made clear and definite by the obliging author. Rather do we share the discomfort of contemporary Russians who lived in the chaos of an unduly protracted period of storm and stress. We speed headlong from the spectacular 'seventies, reverberating with Terroristic explosions and culminating in the assassination of Alexander II, through the arid 'eighties, drab with pseudo-Tolstoyan passivity and Chekhovian whimpering, and into the mad 'nineties, when a hothouse industrialization was foisted upon a rustic, famished country, when erstwhile peasants, stolid and pious, turned over night into militant proletarians, when the intelligentsia tried to digest a chop-suey of Marx-Nietzsche-Ibsen-Oscar Wilde-Verlaine-Plekhanov-Lenin-Mikhailovsky-Chernov. We stop to take breath, as we close the first volume, at the Nizhni-Novgorod Fair, where we see Nicholas II, the puny czar of a gigantic lumbering empire, his minister of finance, Sergey Witte, builder of state vodka-shops and of a papier-mâché industrial prosperity, and other notables, among them the wily mandarin, Li-Hung-Chang, bribed by Witte to sell Russia various concessions in China, which, indirectly, brought about the war with Japan, and more recently, the Sino-Soviet opera bouffe.

All this we see with the eyes of Klim Samgin, the unreal youth, who is taken for what he is not

by his parents and chums, and who submissively plays the rôle he is expected to play. Alone with his thoughts, Klim rebels against this farce, and vindictively doubts and derides everyone and everything. Gorky achieves in this character a magnificent *tour de force*. Constrained to act the regular young radical of the intelligentsia, Klim gains, and lends us, an intimate glimpse of the intellectual and revolutionary circles. But his corrosive skepticism saves him, and us, from swallowing whole this romantic, idealistic, verbose Russia. In this manner the author checks his personal preferences, which he is likely to harbor in these matters and he enables us to be at one and the same time observers and critics. The fear of subjectivity often prompts Gorky to avoid direct description. For example, the Hodynka catastrophe, when thousands of Muscovites were crushed to death at the coronation of Nicholas II, is brought home to us, that is to Klim, in bits and fragments, *post facto*, by means of disconnected accounts of survivors.

A tremendous canvas of Russian life unfolds before our eyes, dizzying in its colorfulness and multiplicity of action and movement. Never before has Gorky used in such a masterly fashion his gift of depicting a man or a scene in a few precisely chosen words. Perhaps he uses his faculty a bit extravagantly; the



MAXIM GORKY

abundance of faces and objects may tax our receptivity. But then, we recall the dimensions of the canvas, its Homeric proportions.

As we close the book, the question inevitably arises: Where does the author stand? Can it be possible that he shares Klim Samgin's sweeping negations? To be sure, Samgin is no more a self-portrait than Madame Bovary. In every inch of his physique and makeup Gorky is unlike his leading character. The whole study of Samgin's evolution, quests and experiences, sexual, philosophic, and political, is purely objective and outside of the author's personality. In fact, as I have suggested before, Samgin is to Gorky an antipathetic character. Yet, this antipathy for the person of Samgin granted, nowhere in the book is it evinced for Samgin's ratiocination and analytic conclusions. No author, however objective, can completely hide his sentiments; we probe them by intuition. In this case, Gorky's negative attitude toward the life he describes is felt from the first page. There is hatred for the government, but there is also contempt for the opposition groups, for the futility of the intelligentsia, for the puerility of the radical youth. The people, the sacred myth in whose behalf the revolutionary struggle has been waged for more than a hundred years, the people are presented without any romantic tinsel: they are stupid, brutal, and primitively sly. There is hardly one positive character or scene in this comprehensive picture of Russia.

How shall we reconcile the absence in this book of any good word for the revolution with Gorky's revolutionary past, his repeated imprisonment under the czar, his intimacy with Lenin, his triumphant return to Soviet Russia, and his declarations of enthusiasm for the present order? It has always been so. For nearly forty years Gorky the artist has had collisions with Gorky the thinker and citizen. In his non-fiction writings he sounded a militant optimism, a faith in man and in the collective will of humanity, a fervent devotion to the revolutionary cause. In his best fiction, and in his autobiographic masterpieces, he has been successful mainly in showing the seamy side of life. When pressed for an

explanation, Gorky tells you that he accentuates the evil in order to combat it, and replace it with beauty and goodness. One must admit that both as artist and citizen Gorky has loomed large on the Russian horizon, regardless of contradictions and collisions.

Black and White

POOR NIGGER. By ORIO VERGANI. Translated from the Italian by W. W. HOBSON. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co. 1930. \$2.50.

Reviewed by BASIL DAVENPORT

THE negro, it seems, is exciting more and more interest, not only in this country, but abroad as well. A colored choir has sung in Westminster Abbey; and an Italian has written a book about the negro in Europe. "Poor Nigger" is interesting for the difference between the conditions it shows and those with us; it shows a more primitive savage against a more mature civilization. George, the leading character, is at the beginning a naked pickaninny in a starched shirt-front, playing outside a French army post in Africa. He is taken up by various employers, drifts to France knowing scarcely a hundred words of French, becomes a boxer, and at last a celebrity—for though the natural contrast between the races is sharper, the social cleavage is far less sharp.

The psychology of this African, straight out of the jungle into the book, is of course much simpler than that of the Negroes in American literature. There is not the inherited recollection of slavery of "The Emperor Jones," the adaptation of alien gods of "The Green Pastures," nor the revolt against discrimination of our negro writers themselves. George has instead an utter simplicity that is very appealing, a wistfulness, a vast good nature, that are true to the best of the negro as we know him, and an occasional burst of ferocity more barbaric than the more diluted atavisms of "The Emperor Jones." This is enough for an interesting and appealing character, but Signor Vergani has an uncontrollable Latin wit that sometimes leads him to give George more than this, and to give him too much. For instance, when he wakes in a disordered hotel room:

The telephone, which had been thrown on to the floor, was sleeping like a dog on a leash. If his swollen black lips had permitted him to whistle, he would have summoned it to his bedside.

But would *he* have entertained that conceit? And again, his rival in love insolently gives him his choice of money or a licking, and throws the money on the floor; George fights and beats him, and then takes the money, remarking that he is a professional. That wit, that sense of the dramatic, that "pride that apes humility," all are excellent for, say, Ruy Blas, but they are not right for George as he has been presented.

The scenes and atmospheres are everywhere excellent. The author appears to know boxing well. He writes with an enthusiasm that is infectious, and yet is tempered by a calm irony. He can say:

Among the boxers the little coquetties of the profession became fashionable: the perfunctory hand-shake at the commencement of a fight, the radiant smile after receiving a hard blow, and the brief pretence of having been touched below the belt, with the object of being able to agree with a generous smile to overlook the offense and go on with the fight.

And he can also write an account of a championship fight, calling it "The Forest Path," which carries one away.

But though the book is almost uniformly good in details, one has the feeling that the author has too often allowed himself to be distracted from his main purpose, until he almost loses sight of it. "Poor Nigger" would be a better book if he had tried to make it more, or less, a tragedy.

"Poor Nigger" is in conception a tragedy, ending with George's downfall and death; but until that conclusion, it is impossible for an American reader not to feel that George is remarkably well off. He is exploited, but he is never humiliated. And if he sells his skill at boxing for much less than it is worth, he has all that he wants, and as Sancho Panza points out, in that case there is no more to be said; the fault lies not so much in the rascality of George's white promoters as in the limited range of his own desires. If this seems callous, the fault is with Signor Vergani, who demands for George so much more pity than he deserves that one may perhaps give him rather less. The author promises, by the title, by the tone of the opening chapter, by every implication throughout, that he will give us a trag-

edy; and what he gives is the story of a boy who starts with literally nothing and becomes European champion at his weight and contender for the world's title—a position far better than that of laborers of any color or country—and this rise is steady until the end of the penultimate chapter. The tragedy, when it does come, is extraordinarily hurried, and curiously vague. George goes to America, where the world's championship is, and then there is a chapter of dark hints:

There are in America tens of thousand of boxers, and one can fall into bad hands. There are thieving managers, there are promoters who do not pay up and go off to Mexico, leaving the boxer with a broken nose to face a hostile crowd. There are Negroes ready to serve him, but also ready to swindle him. It is forbidden to drink, but if one is ready to pay for it, one can drink a kind of alcohol which kills five thousand people in a year.

And so on. In the end a delirious George dies before an African idol in a shop window, an ending that might have been effective, but which seems artificial as the conclusion of a catastrophe which is already hasty to the point of seeming forced. One suspects that Signor Vergani does not know America at first hand.

A New Van Dine Tale

THE SCARAB MURDER CASE. By S. S. VAN DINE. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1930. \$2.

Reviewed by EUGENE REYNAL

STRETCHED upon the floor of Dr. Bliss' famous private museum lay Benjamin Kyle, his skull crushed by a statue of Sakhmet, the Egyptian Goddess of Vengeance.

So begins the new Van Dine mystery. I recommend it to you not only as his best but as very close to the top of all detective stories. The element of fantasy that tended to mar the "Bishop Murder Case" is here carefully restrained, and by confining the suspects to five members of the household, all introduced at the beginning, Van Dine gives the reader every opportunity to strive for the solution himself.

In the "Scarab Murder Case" the ever resourceful Philo Vance emerges slightly more suave than in his previous cases. He is complete master of the situation, parcelling out to his associates scraps of information that he picks up, but never exposing until the end the inner workings of his mind. In spite of the author's explicitness, it was not until reaching page 234 that I felt sure of the murderer.

S. S. Van Dine is an author whose significance might easily be underrated. He has succeeded five times in writing consistently fine detective novels which have reached a unique position in popular esteem, and which have a literary quality worthy of more than passing attention. He is a man of real cultivation, an author, as every one now knows, who made his first reputation in more serious fields. He is erudite, and yet he is able to introduce the most abstruse pieces of information in such a way that they tend to compliment the average reader's intelligence. His plots are ingenious and worked out in the greatest detail and his characters are true, three-dimensional, vivid human beings. I have long felt that the cause of his amazing popularity lay in his ability to pass the "high hat" over to the reader. His highly specialized knowledge in a great variety of subjects is presented in such a way that you almost feel it is your own. And though I know it is offensive to a good many readers, I feel sure it is that quality, that ability to set the reader at ease when he is taken far outside the province of his own knowledge, that makes Van Dine one of the most widely read of mystery writers.

"The Scarab Murder Case" might almost serve as a handbook on Egyptology. Yet the story rushes on to a series of exciting climaxes, carefully planned, artistically constructed, and ingeniously baffling. It is a joy to read and ranks number one in the season's mysteries.

"The various reputations left by Charles Cotton, who was born just three hundred years ago, have never coalesced in one," says the *Manchester Guardian*. "There is Cotton the translator of Montaigne, Cotton the author of a coarse burlesque of Virgil, Cotton the authority on the growing of trees, Cotton who wrote the Wonders of the Peake, Cotton the lyric poet, and Cotton who called Izaak Walton father, and who joined his name to Walton's for ever."

Anybody's Money's Worth

THE WEEK-END LIBRARY. Issue of 1930. Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1930. \$2.50.

Reviewed by HENRY WALCOTT BOYNTON

THIS fat book renews an odd publishing stunt which has proved successful. Earlier issues have been well received. This volume goes forth with the useful backing of the Book-of-the-Month Club. It is aimed at the ordinary citizen, as "the best buy ever offered for the money." I wish the publisher might have restrained his salespeople from this phrase, on the general principle that good writing out not to be marketed in terms of wildcat stocks or shaving soap. But the theory is that distribution is the thing. Get your article into the customer's hands and it will work for his salvation. This is good writing, and its ardent sponsors may well argue that their brisk method is the way to give it a chance with the vast audience which shies so fearfully from anything deep or highbrow.

It is a piece of book-making to tickle the curiosity of any bookish buyer. Who determined its contents, and on what principle? It begins with Somerset Maugham's "Of Human Bondage," a novel of 650 close-printed pages. Then come Morley's fantasy "Where the Blue Begins" and Conrad's tale "Youth," both in larger type and on pages of different size. Follows "The Time Machine" of H. G. Wells, one of his ingenious projections of the future. This brings us two-thirds of the way through the book, all on a diet of fiction.

But here suddenly the fare changes to a miscellaneous and apparently haphazard agglomeration of literary odds and ends—sketches, yarns, essay, parody. Then you come on extracts from Lawrence's "Revolt in the Desert" and Aldous Huxley's "Jesting Pilate." And most amazingly of all, you find between Irvin Cobb's "Speaking of Operations" and the T. E. Lawrence selections, six Walt Whitman poems taken from a recent anthology. How Walt would stare and gasp at some of his neighbors here—and what a kick he would get out of fitting them into his all-receptive *catalogue humaine*. "Three-Days' Battle," from "The Saga of Billy the Kid," would assure him that there is grit still in his children and comrades of These States. Aldous Huxley's notes on America would be something of a challenge to his booming optimism. This, too he would deal with. . . .

It would be interesting to have the mechanical secret of our literary omnibus. These books and bits of books are assembled without change of typography or pagination. Are they printed from the original plates, or wafted by some photographic sleight-of-hand from the original sheets? Whatever the process, it has, I must admit, produced a marvelous "buy" for the money!

A Moses from Wall Street

COMMON STOCKS AND THE AVERAGE MAN. By J. GEORGE FREDERICK. New York: The Business Bourse. 1929. \$4.

Reviewed by MYRON M. STRAIN

THE important thing to remember in reading this book is that it is the distilled common sense of an extremely shrewd, widely experienced, and well informed practical economist. It would be hard to imagine anyone who has anything to do with investments reading it without interest and profit, and, if the reader does not make investment his regular occupation and study, it is probable that the profit will be of the most tangible and realizable sort.

The reason that it is important to remember this fact is that "Common Stocks and the Average Man" is one of the most thoroughly annoying books ever put on paper. Mr. Frederick has positive notions about everything from the intellectual capacity of woman to the economic effects of prohibition and style obsolescence, and he does not fear to air them freely and dogmatically. His work abounds in petty, unimportant contradictions and lapses which, if they mean what they seem to mean, are so exasperatingly fallacious that it is hard to credit him with believing them—and which have no particular bearing on his thesis in any event. It is written in great and obvious haste. Whole passages of it are couched in the most hideous and degraded form of the new language, fincense, which sometimes degenerates almost into a burlesque of fincense—as when we are told of "searching ratios," and advised to "contact . . . a well digested point of view" that, remarkably enough,

"is not afraid to lay blame" and can even "speak up valiantly."

Why writers about financial matters usually feel under a bond to address their audience in this precise manner of stereotyped illiteracy, and even to *extend* its capacity for banality, I do not pretend to guess. As I have intimated, however, these irritating "angles" of "the picture" are more or less irrelevant and immaterial in Mr. Frederick's scheme of things, and it is profitable to look past them to the substantial value of his material and his ideas about it. His book, inspired by the October-November panic, is far more than an inquest. It is, in fact, one of the most comprehensive, sensible, and workable treatises on investing the average man's surplus earnings that has ever appeared. The author is aware of the implications of our swing toward non-political socialism through widely held common stocks, and his observations on the social aspects of our financial developments are shrewd and worthy of respect. They occupy, however, here and there in the volume, a total bulk that I should estimate at less than one quarter of the whole, and the remaining three quarters are concerned with the most direct, specific, well-informed, and enlightened counsel about investments that the average investor has ever had access to. There is a minimum of vague generalizing and a maximum of exact and sound advice as to how to estimate investment value and price, where to find needed information and how, even down to the matter of the physical accessories needed to use it. Mr. Frederick is not timid about giving real names, dates, and figures, nor using them to illustrate the procedures he recommends. Toward the end, he supplies an admirable set of thumb-nail sketches of our various industrial groups, and supplies a list of common stock "bargains." The effect of all this, in spite of a pre-eminently optimistic mood, is to present a completely and wholesomely realistic, rational, and usable program to the bewildered creatures who are accustomed to being befuddled by incomprehensible theories and then bludgeoned by "cyclical panics" in investment matters. For them it was written, and to them it is strongly commended.

The Book Trade

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the greatest discretion. Should the publishers play safe and eliminate from next year's lists all but the sure-fire, certain-to-be-reasonably-sold books, the results might be horrid to contemplate. With all the uncertainties and experiments eliminated, all the "unexpected" books (like "The Bridge of San Luis Rey" and "Death Comes for the Archbishop"),—with only those stodgy productions guaranteed to sell 10,000 or so to the indiscriminating, we should have a season devoid of interest, to be followed by calamity.

If there is to be a sharp curtailment of titles, it must be accomplished with infinite discretion, and this discretion must be matched by a careful discrimination on the part of the public. They must sharpen their critical wits, refuse to buy the mediocrity, go out of their way to purchase and recommend real books.

And if it be said that the public is incapable of discriminating, the reply is, nonsense! The public referred to is that 100,000 or less of intelligent American readers whose taste, judgment, and recommendation make or mar the fortunes of all books worthy to be read.

Herr Kasimir Edschmid, whose biography-novel, "Lord Byron," has just appeared, is one of the few modern authors who have won medals at the Olympic Games. He comes of a family remarkable for its longevity.

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