

# Victorian London *Curiosa*

*FORLORN SUNSET.* By Michael Sadleir. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Co. 1946. 496 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by GEORGE DANGERFIELD

LONDON in the mid-nineteenth century was the scene of the world's most awful poverty. Its slums were so hideous that even the Roman of Nero's day would have turned his face from them, and even the Neapolitan of King Bomba's dispensation have gazed upon them with mild disgust. No other city of the time—not Calcutta, not Dublin—could show anything to equal these accursed rookeries. The economists of the '60s and '70s could not suggest, nor the legislators write, nor the Governments execute any remedy; for this was still the era of *laissez-faire*, and property was sacred, particularly when, as was the case with London real estate, it was rotten and bulging with filth, misery, disease, crime and profits.

Today, when the principle of *laissez-faire* appears to be girding itself for its final and most savage battles, it is not without interest to read about that principle in its heyday, and to observe the daily lives of some of its victims. Some such opportunity is provided in the pages of Mr. Sadleir's latest novel. "Forlorn Sunset" is a companion piece to "Fanny by Gaslight." Readers of the earlier novel will doubtless remember that, as a picture of the London underworld in the '70s, it was an effective story, but that there was a lilt to it which seemed incongruous. At times one might almost have been listening to an *opéra bouffe* of which (to mix the periods a little) the libretto was written by George Gissing and the music by Jacques Offenbach. For it was hard to believe that the underworld of London in the '70s was not more gloomy, more hysterical, and more uneasily aware of the pietism of the times than Mr. Sadleir cared to make it.

The same carefree spirit seems to have crept into the story which underlies "Forlorn Sunset." Mr. Sadleir tells us how, in the early '60s, a pawnbroker cynically bequeathed to a London Missionary Society a piece of property which was valuable chiefly because it housed a flourishing red-light district. He appears to be about to explore the relationship between such a district and the slums which fed it. But the theme is a horrible one, his is not the spirit of a Lord Shaftesbury, and very soon there drifts into his novel an adventurous air of adventure and even of romance.

For there is no doubt at all that Mr. Sadleir knows his subject. If his novel seems to be oddly light-hearted, it is probably because it is a novel which should have been written (but, of course, could not have been written) by a Victorian. What it lacks is the Victorian point of view. The Victorian was never quite able to rid himself of the notion that society, with all its ramifications and injustices, was providential; and that paupers and prostitutes had some mysterious connection with original sin. His morality was more compelling than his economics; but if his morality was misleading, at least it existed. It was a force. He could have brought to a theme like this (had he ever dared to tell what Mr. Sadleir tells) a wrath, an amazement, a gloom, and a terror which the modern novelist can no longer feel. It is not Mr. Sadleir's fault that his book sometimes reads like a conducted tour of Paphos, complete with charts and lantern slides; or that his characters, lively and credible as they often are, seem more to illustrate their author's knowledge than to be illuminated by it. In brief, "Forlorn Sunset" is not so much a novel as it is a brisk and scholarly collection of London *curiosa*. As such, it is highly readable. For there is probably no other living author who, in this very special field, could write one half as well as Mr. Sadleir does.

"Forlorn Sunset" has two more or less interdependent plots. One traces the stories of a number of people—a philanthropist, a housemaid, the disinherited son of the cynical pawn-



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broker, a nobleman, a journalist, a financier—who in their several ways, deliberately or unknowingly, encountered the London underworld and were, with one exception, either ruined or killed by it. The other plot deals with the uprooting and destruction of a villainous group whose business it is to kidnap little girls and, after benevolently debauching their minds and bodies, turn them into the world as prostitutes. In the course of reading the book one acquires a good deal of information about London in the '60s and '70s; and there are some very remarkable sketches of Londoners, particularly of a certain kind of flash bully and a certain kind of heroic clergyman, which are obviously authentic.

## Voodoo Tale

*THE BEAST OF THE HAITIAN HILLS.* By Philippe Thoby-Marcelin and Pierre Marcelin. New York: Rinehart & Co., Inc. 1946. 210 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ROBERT PICK

THIS is the story of Marin Dutilleul, a well-to-do city grocer and a full-blooded man who after the tragic death of his wife fulfills an odd wish of his, and returns to live on the countryside. The happenings that follow "Mist' Dutilleul's" settling down at Musseau, a heretofore peaceful mountain community, form a fantastic voodoo tale—a story about the paganized Christianity of Haitian folk (or their Christianized superstitions), about wrathful Penates (called *loas* in those parts), about werewolves, witchcraft midwifery, greedy sorcerers, about the "Great Baron Samedi" and about the "Cigouave," the ferocious man-faced giant dog of the tropical hills. On another level, to be sure, N. M. Marcelin's novel is a gruesome drama of human passion, of human conscience, and the failure of human loyalty.

But actually there is no such thing as a split into different levels in this narration. It is done in an altogether brilliant blending of straight storytelling, two-pronged skepticism, and an allegorical undercurrent which nowhere thrusts itself upon the reader. There is an invigorating freshness and a sinewy power in the style of these authors which defy popular notions about tropical characteristics. It is a proof of their genuine talent and the earnestness of their artistic pursuits, as well as of the ability of Peter C. Rhodes, the translator, that their novel has, as well as it did, survived the filtering process of another language.

# Our Palsied Batting Average

**SCIENTISTS AGAINST TIME.** By James Phinney Baxter, 3rd. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1946. 455 pp. \$5.

Reviewed by PHILIP WYLIE

**T**HIS is the official story of the secret weapons designed for World War II. It describes the battle of brains that rages in modern warfare behind the battle of men. In fairly chronological order it tells how the scientists of America were organized and how they went to work with scientists from other United Nations; it depicts the brilliant, deadly instruments they devised: rockets, radar, loran, explosives, proximity fuses, air and ship equipment, vehicles for the new science of amphibious attack, medicines, poison gases (with an explanation of why they were not used), gadgets, processes, tactics, and, of course, the atomic bomb.

The author of this fabulous narrative is the president of Williams College. He writes not for the technically educated, but for the technically interested. His field is so immense that, sometimes, he is forced to a mere listing of minor achievements. But the inside story of the major scientific events of the war is well and clearly covered. And the book has two qualities of a particularly dramatic nature—one emphasized, the other as often implied as stated. The first is historical suspense. Dr. Baxter furnishes his reader constantly with the data which drove the furiously, often frantically, working scientists: enemy action and enemy plans as anticipated by our Intelligence. The "time" against which our scientists raced was the speed of enemy science. And if we won the last battle of the war, we nevertheless lost many intermediate engagements.

The second dramatic quality is the bitter, ceaseless fight that scientists had to wage with our own military leaders and those of our allies. Long before the war began, certain scientists urged upon Roosevelt the organization of their numbers for a conflict they knew was inevitable. If Hitler had possessed Roosevelt's education, the world would be Nazi today, save for the fact—as a scientist once pointed out—that if Hitler had been that well educated he could never have become a Hitler. It was the President's appointment of the famed Vannevar Bush, and the use of funds from his celebrated "blank check" of a hundred millions, which started America toward victory even before there was war. Conant of Harvard, K. T. Compton of M.I.T., Tolman of Caltech, and

other immortals of the Office of Scientific Research and Development provided the weapons that won the war and, in the bargain, birthed the Atomic Age.

But the scientists—masters of technology in a technological struggle—were treated as inferiors by the Brass Hats. These, as every informed news-reader realizes today, do not have the knowledge, or enough training in the scientific method, to understand what science is about, or how it works, or how scientists work. Dr. Baxter reveals that no scientist was ever permitted to enter the top planning councils of the war. A scientifically illiterate gold braid reserved strategy for itself—and counted the best brains in the world as fit only for tinkering.

Caltech offered the Army a pulse-jet motor and was scornfully turned down years before it appeared as the German buzz-bomb. America's Goddard was the father of rockets—not Russia or Germany—but Goddard was ignored in America. According to a recent article in *Fortune*, the German scientists we "imported" to tell us about rockets are depressed because we have no rocket specialists advanced enough even to talk intelligently to them! And millions of men who saw combat early in the war could add indefinitely to a list of obsolete equipment and ideas with which they went forth to save American liberty from the Fascists.

"Scientists Against Time" documents the incapacity of American-trained military men to manage war in a technological world. They won because of what science urged upon



—Godal in PM.

It's Later Than You Think.

Time after time, as this book makes plain, what science proffered to the War and Navy Departments went begging.

The mountains, plains, and shores of the world were littered with tens of thousands of American dead that would not have perished if various generals and admirals had owned enough education to listen understandingly to scientists. This secret shame of America is in the open, now.

Science gave radar to the Army before Pearl Harbor and if the Army had had the brains to use it, the raiding Japs would have been met by fighters aloft and ready anti-aircraft batteries. Pearl Harbor investigators should pry into military stupidity, above all else! Dr. Urey is said to have claimed that the atomic bomb could have been ready eighteen months sooner but for General Groves's love of red tape, of "channels," and of the high-school fraternity brand of "secrecy" which infests the military mind. Fritz Zwicky of

them in the teeth of their prejudices. They almost lost because of what science gave their enemies. And the enemy did lose only because his military men were even more ignorant of science than our own. Dr. Baxter is polite about this—he is still connected with the War College; but no reviewer need be polite. For, if we ever have another war, our enemy, whoever he may be, will not act as stupidly as the German and Jap militarists. Realizing his struggle must be waged by technologies, he will examine not so much the American terrain as the scientific ignorance of our Brass Hats to find our vulnerable spots.

"Scientists Against Time" is thus a blue-print for our future defeat—unless we persuade Congress to compel our Army, Navy, and Air Force to get together, and to get a modern education. The past two wars represent narrow escapes—two strikes on a team with a palsied batting average.