

# Scholars and Ladies

titute Natasha during a severe illness suddenly bring Paul to life. The void of loneliness in his daily existence is filled by the exciting promise of a happy future. The story here acquires a Manon Lescaut flavor. The transformed Paul offers marriage, but this Russian Manon, sincerely loving him, cannot give up her carefree, sing-song life of quondam callers for the dull and respectable security offered by her shoemaker. The narrative now takes on the darker, tragic flavor of a Dostoevsky. In a scene that may well have been inspired by that horrific one in "The Idiot" where Rogozhin murders the beautiful Nastasya, Paul kills the prostitute who refused to become his wife in order to save her from herself.

The romantic and melodramatic aspects of the book are considerably neutralized by the wonderful visual convincingness of background and characterization. Even thus early in his artistic career, Gorky reveals his unusual perceptiveness in bringing to life those off-center creatures of humanity that peopled his later tales. His persistent fault of wordiness is here: "The dirty old clock, with its yellow, fly-specked face, ticked off the seconds which dropped monotonously into the abyss of eternity." Chekhov once wrote him:

You indulge in so many qualifications that the reader's mind finds it difficult to concentrate on them, and he soon grows tired. You understand it at once when I say: "A man sat on the grass." You understand it because it is clear and makes no demands on the attention. On the other hand, it is not easily understood, and it is hard for the brain to grasp, when I write: "A tall, narrow-chested, middle-sized man, with a red beard sat down on the green grass, already trampled by pedestrians, sat down silently, shyly, and looked around him timidly." That does not settle down in the brain at once, and good fiction should settle down at once. . . .

Despite such faults, "Orphan Paul" has the authentic ring of the best of Gorky's later works. The scene in which the gloomy, puritanical Paul, in a frenzy of despair at the thought of losing his Natasha, plunges into her attic room in the midst of her drunken companions, and tries unsuccessfully to simulate their gay abandon, is as fine a thing as Gorky ever wrote. Nor is there absent his extraordinary feeling and sympathy for all living humanity. Though the picture he paints is one of misery, unhappiness, and oppression, one distinguishes in this gray background the bright tints of hope that reflect his characteristic conviction that Russia is still the most wonderful country in the world where "even the fools are original."

**A VICTORIAN ALBUM.** *Some Lady Novelists of the Period.* By Lucy Poate Stebbins. New York: Columbia University. 1947. 226 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ERIC BENTLEY

**F**AKE scholars parade their erudition in numbered footnotes and extended quotations; the elaborate mechanical apparatus exists to conceal an intellectual vacuum. The genuine scholar, on the other hand, does not transfer the contents of his filing-cabinet directly to his books. He absorbs the material and then writes out of his head. Hence a genuine scholar's work can be flip-pantly dismissed as "subjective." A fake scholar's work is as "objective" as the telephone directory, though seldom as useful.

Mrs. Lucy Poate Stebbins is a genuine scholar. Her little biographical essays on Victorian lady novelists are written "out of her head" which she has taken care to fill with relevant lore. One recalls with pleasure the history of the Trollope family which Mrs. Stebbins wrote not long ago in collaboration with her son. The Stebbinses found the golden mean between the falsification of so-called fictional biography and the elaborately factual meaninglessness of (fake) scholarly biography. Mrs. Stebbins has found it again in "A Victorian Album."

An essay apiece is assigned in the new book to four considerable people: Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, and Margaret Oliphant. Each essay amply proves that the art of scholarship is to conceal scholarship: the narrative is always simple, smooth, uncluttered, and quietly witty, and behind it is a more than ample erudition. It is a pity, though, that Mrs. Stebbins takes such a low view of literary criticism. (The lit-

erature peroration of her book opens with the clause: "When criticism has said its arbitrary say . . ."). Had Mrs. Stebbins thought more highly of criticism, she would have trusted her own critical judgment a little more, and might have concluded that George Eliot, for example, is an even more impressive figure than "A Victorian Album" gives her credit for being. Literary biography cannot be independent of literary criticism for the good reason that writing is, to say the least, one of the chief parts of a writer's life. If (as I think) George Eliot's books are better than Mrs. Stebbins implies, that is only another way of saying that George Eliot was a greater genius and a greater person than the woman Mrs. Stebbins portrays.

I dwell on this example because Mrs. Stebbins's book would be better throughout for a more critical (I don't mean fault-finding) account of her authors' works. As social history, as a study of mores and a milieu, "A Victorian Album" is a good book. You learn much from it about the lives of Victorian women, specifically women who were writers and very much else besides, and you learn all this in the best possible way: not from statistics or documentary pseudo-demonstration but from the particular case, the concrete event, the imaginatively recreated reality. Mrs. Stebbins's talents and opinions being what they are, it may well be that her initial and concluding chapters, dealing with fifteen lesser ladies and with the social pattern of which they were part, form the most serviceable portion of the book.



## FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT: No. 195

*A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 195 will be found in the next issue.*

RBPJ DI OPHN? PY NHAJK

TETTWN; QZWU? P JFPYIDNYJ,

IBDYDYQ JFZETWN.


—IZWDJEUN—VPHNI

QFPDYQNF.

*Answer to Literary Crypt No. 194  
Anger makes dull men witty, but  
it keeps them poor.*

—FRANCIS BACON.  
"Apothegms."

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## LET THE EAGLE SCREAM

ANYONE who has the good fortune to be old enough today to have traveled in Europe before the long Victorian peace was smashed by the First World War finds the newspapers now dismal and ominous reading. The Gallic elegance and luxury of Paris, the imperial majesty and wealth of London, the palaces and parks of exquisite Vienna, the villages of Germany, tranquil and untouched for generations, the start-ling beauty of Greece, the drowsy English countryside, left nostalgic impressions on the malleable American youth of 1913, impressions that in these latter days have the power to shock and rend the mind with fear for the whole Western world and for humanity itself. This old, ordered tranquillity, this vision of ancient cultures contrasted strangely then with the sprawling disorder of American cities and backyards thirty-four years ago and concealed from unknowing eyes the seething unrest that was to erupt into war and the beginning of world revolution.

If your memories of those realms of civilization that lay between the Atlantic and the Balkans are still green, it is as savage a blow to look now upon the countenance of Europe as it would be to see, seamed and torn by some frightful accident, the once fair features of someone you have loved. But the blight that has crept over Europe, and Asia too, leaving millions of human beings cold, starving, hopeless, and disunited has not crossed either the Pacific or the Atlantic to our shores, though it has become almost a passion with countless Americans, whether intellectuals, or professional malcontents and grumblers, to condemn almost every aspect of our life and our activities. They say that our foreign policy is either

too weak or too strong, that the conflict between labor and management will tear us apart, that there has been corruption in high places, that the conduct of our occupying armies abroad is so appalling that no one subject to them has any faith left in American institutions; some of them even say that we should drop our improved atom bombs on Russia's cities before it is too late to save ourselves. It is likely that this kind of dissatisfaction and disgust has followed every war and that it is not necessarily a symptom of deep-seated unrest. It can become a malignant disease, engendering feverish rancors and the sour bile of discontent in the body politic for a way of life that was a century and a half ago the wonder of the world.

It is time to reaffirm our faith in ourselves and our country without appearing to be chauvinistic or smugly complacent. We are going to need self-confidence, even national egotism, to stand unmoved and stalwart through the coming years, for this continent which we share with Mexico and Canada is a fortress and a bulwark against universal disaster, perhaps the only one that can save humanity from the revolutions and civil wars that may bring upon the world the dark ages once more. Glance for a moment at the news not a month old from the rest of the world: England herself, the very symbol of power and wealth, fighting for her economic life; Rumania, once fertile of grain, starving; India promised freedom but menaced by civil war; China at war with itself and in the midst of gigantic inflation.

Look then at the United States of America. We have survived the Second World War. Though our economy is burdened with an astronomical debt we are stronger than ever; it is even trite to say that we are incomparably the richest and the most powerful nation on earth. Our abundance is so great that we can afford to send millions of dollars abroad and millions of tons of food. Whether or not our generosity is necessary as a weapon of peace and an instrument of diplomacy it is true that, aside from vast public grants, American individuals continue their customary beneficences. Streams of packages of food and clothes and books are sent whenever there is an appeal for them, and the money that will help rebuild an English cathedral; even ten millions recently to be used for medical instruction in China. There is hardly a place on earth that is not touched by this health- and life-giving unrelenting flood. To look askance at this phenomenon is as foolish as it is to refuse to be proud of it.

Our democratic institutions have emerged from the war unimpaired. A party strongly entrenched in power for nearly fourteen years has surrendered in a peaceful election to its opponents. In the long line of our Presidents, who have mostly come from humble beginnings, we now have an able man who once sold neckties and shirts over the counter; and there are few Americans who find this remarkable or worth a smile. The restrictions invented by a government that was for a time experimenting with a planned economy and those forced on us by the necessities of war are melting away. We do not have to live in a police state or under a dictatorship. Our economic system is unimpaired. Anyone anywhere in the United States can start a business; and if taxes and competition permit it, he can become as wealthy as he pleases. Our inventive capacity is still phenomenal; indeed it has been stimulated by the war. Whether in medicine, mechanics, physics, or chemistry our scientists lead the world; and there is no lack of millions for new laboratories, whether under government auspices, or private means. Our factories, occasionally closed by strikes, are nevertheless working at full capacity. We could supply the world with motor cars, trucks, washing machines, refrigerators, and all the other devices which minister to man's health and comfort and ease. American wells on this or other continents are pouring out niagaras of oil; we have enough timber in our forests to rebuild America and enough unmined coal to keep our industries going until we find power from splitting the atom or from the sun itself. The wages paid to labor were never higher. Our primary educational system is at present seriously undermanned, but the evil is now commonly known and diagnosed, and the cure will follow. Our universities and colleges are packed to the doors, but more than a billion will soon be spent in extending their facilities to any youth or girl who wants a higher education.

This list of our blessings, our gifts of ingenuity and energy, our power to work and produce could be continued almost indefinitely, for when the eagle starts screaming it is hard to silence so lusty a bird. Someone should set down in order and in glowing words that could be remembered a song dedicated to our strength and our virtues. It is time that we saw ourselves in perspective with the rest of the world and looked to the future with confidence and courage, so that we may have the compassion and the power to regenerate and come to the aid of all mankind. H. S.