

Applied Relativity of Morals

CONSPIRATOR. By Humphrey Slater.
New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.
1948. 184 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ROBERT PICK

THIS novel starts very much like any number of English postwar stories. It introduces an attractive society girl and a tense young gentleman returned from the battlefields who is about as much in love with her as she is with him. And "a month later Harriet Elizabeth Fanshawe Frodsham, daughter of the late Alfred Frodsham and the Lady Anne Frodsham, was married to Major the Honourable Desmond Ferneaux-Lightfoot, D.S.O., Grenadier Guards, at St. George's, Hanover Square." In the two chapters following that far from surprising turn the reader may enjoy a delicately handled account of a short Continental honeymoon such as moneyed upperclass people may still wrest from the government-decreed austerity of contemporary English life.

As it is, Desmond Lightfoot lives under a rule more rigid and far more incisive than that of His Majesty's present government. Some years before the outbreak of the war he has joined the Communist party, and has been subject ever since to the regimen of absolute obedience which the Mos-

cow bureau imposes on the faithful. Lightfoot is a Russian spy. Having access to some of the top secrets of the Imperial General Staff, he keeps providing his party superiors with valuable military information.

We are told that his childhood experiences in the Ireland of the 1920's have imbued him with a certain sympathy for conspiratorial and revolutionary work, and that later a young university teacher has won him over to the Stalinist cause. We listen to him as, in the fellow-traveler language appropriate for the occasion, he imparts to his wife some generalities on the better world to come. We watch his party discipline in action in the face of the indignities to which he is subjected by two minor Russian agents. And we witness him, when his tragedy reaches his climax, repeating to himself the Party theory on the relativity of morals. But the enormity of Lightfoot's initial decision, the deeper roots of his fanatical allegiance to a creed whose learned basis he has merely glimpsed, and his masochistic delight in self-surrender are touched on but sketchily.

Obviously Mr. Slater is, at least at this stage of his writing and fighting career, not interested in the complexities of a rare—or perhaps not

Your Literary I.Q.

By Howard Collins

BURIAL PLACES IN SONG AND STORY

From the brief descriptions of their burial places can you identify the characters in this week's quiz? Allowing five points for each one named and another five for the story in which he appears, a score of sixty is par, seventy is very good, and eighty or better is excellent. Answers are on page 27.

1. In the old churchyard in the valley, in a corner obscure and alone, they have fitted a slab of the granite so gray, and this maiden lies under the stone.
2. She's sleeping in the valley, and the mocking bird is singing o'er her grave.
3. The only inscription on her tombstone was the letter "A."
4. A dozen men sat on his corpse to find out why he died—and they buried him at four crossroads, with a stake in his inside!
5. The body of this movie star was brought from Hollywood by her press agent to the dingy mining town where she had spent her childhood, and she was buried in the cemetery on the hill.
6. Her highborn kinsman came and bore her away from me to shut her up in a sepulcher, in a tomb by the sounding sea.
7. Her twin brother buried her (alive) in a copper-lined vault way down in the depths of the family mansion.
8. Because they lacked the money for funeral expenses, this old man's family buried him at night in a field near Highway 66, with a letter in a bottle explaining the circumstances.
9. After he was ripped by the machinery in a carpet factory, his widow bought the fourteen-yard piece that had his remains wove in; she wouldn't let them roll him up, so he was planted full length, with one end sticking up as a monument.
10. Slowly and sadly we laid him down, from the field of his fame fresh and gory; we carved not a line, we raised not a stone, but we left him alone in his glory.

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so rare—psychological situation. He has a horrible story to tell, and he does tell it with the heat and the rush of a man on the brink of despair, with the same great talent which kept the readers of his first novel, "The Heretics," under its spell. In fact, it is much the same story. In "The Heretics," a Communist in Spain betrays his best friend who has become a non-conformist. In "Conspirator," that abomination is given an even more poignant turn, and the thumb-screws placed on the reader's imagination are tightened even more: Major Lightfoot's young wife discovers his secret, and when he dutifully reports that mishap to his masters, they order him to "eliminate" her.

Since from that point on Mr. Slater's novel assumes all the outward characteristics of a thriller, it wouldn't be cricket to reveal its denouement. On the whole he has again done a beautiful job in conveying his frightening message. Of all younger novelists with whom I am familiar, he is the one who should tell us through a story how a man born to freedom comes to hand himself over to tyranny.

Death, Nos. 1 and 2

THE SHROUDED WOMAN. By Maria-Luisa Bombal. New York: Farrar, Straus & Co. 1948. 198 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by MARJORIE BRACE

THERE is a kind of bad art about which it often seems merely cruel to be satirical or harsh. It belongs to a category that critics label "insincere," though what is painful about it is precisely its sincerity. It is not commercial, or intentionally flashy or deceptive; it is like a passionately felt love-letter that expresses infantile emotions.

Miss Bombal is a prominent Chilean writer, and, in her novel, according to the jacket, "the spell of the mists and shadows of Chile and of the colorful people of that strange and romantic country is woven compellingly to create a tale as vivid as a dream." But "romantic" countries exist only in fantasy, and the mists of this book are those of a pseudo-poetic abandonment to morbid notions about love and death.

Here a shrouded woman lies, dead, but still dreaming over her stormy past, though longing for the "second death of the dead." And no wonder, if, as Miss Bombal claims, "the fate of so many women seems to be to turn over and over in their heart some love sorrow," to lament that "caught in your snares . . . in order to feel myself alive, I needed your constant suffering by my side."

For it is not only women who are consumed by love sorrows. There is a female in the book about whose general effect the men are in tortured agreement: "Only God was to blame . . . for having created a being so prodigiously beautiful, a being such that when one has known her, one must go on seeing her every day, in order to be able to live." Women, however, often do stop living: for example, "another disordered creature, whom one unfortunate word could have thrown into insanity." It did, too, because when her husband "knew at last what it was to sigh," and, "throwing himself on the ground," wrote "his first poetry," Silvia grabbed a pistol he had carelessly laid on the table, "pressed the barrel to her temple," and "courageously pulled the trigger."

It is all, as Jane Austen remarked about the Gothic romance, most amazing horrid and uncommonly dreadful. It is also a kind of writing seldom produced in this country, the ideology of which does not encourage a mysticism of destructiveness. Yet surely there are many enjoyers of torch songs who would luxuriate in fictional love-dying if our literature were not socially inhibited from giving free rein to its peculiar thrills.

But, though such occasional literary sports as Poe maintain a continuous popularity, our prodigiously beautiful women never really acquire a deathly mystery: they are photographed for *Life* in a bathing suit, and their busts publicly measure thirty-six inches. The agonies of our tempestuous women are somehow conditioned by the superficial realities of the advertisements that, in radio or magazine, enclose them in callous parentheses. One feels that Miss Bombal's beauty-stricken poet would not have

FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT: No. 254

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 254 will be found in the next issue.

YFF SCQ GHBFR HJQB, E GEFF

AYUV SCQ DYPPQP ZZYEMPS

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Answer to Literary Crypt No. 253

All that is human must retrograde if it does not advance.

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