

# Domestic Ructions in Helsingfors

UNCLE, AUNT AND JEZEBEL. By Martha Hedman. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 260 pp. \$3.

By ANN F. WOLFE

AND now we have a Baltic "Life with Father," a round of uproarious domestic ructions set in turn-of-the-century Helsingfors. For Father substitute Swedish Uncle Mathias, for Vinnie Aunt Mathilda. Something new has been added—Uncle's "lovely lady," Aunt's Jezebel. Take your choice, as Martha had to, and call her Tant Elsa.

Niece Martha, who tells this true story of her girlhood days in Russian-ruled Finland, is the celebrated Swedish actress Martha Hedman. While living with Uncle and Aunt she studied for the stage under Siri von Essen-Strindberg, wife of the Swedish dramatist.

The scenes that Martha rehearsed on the stage were pallid affairs compared to Uncle's Scenes in the dining room. In Uncle's Olympian script there were no minor Scenes. They were all major, and in the most dramatic of them coffee played a leading role. The day stood or fell by Uncle's breakfast coffee. Until after Uncle had notched the first cigar of the day with his gold penknife and taken his first sip of coffee, there could be no such thing as a natural breath for Aunt, for Martha, for the two maids. The four women trembled and an awesome hush was on them as they awaited the sacred moment of the first sip. Sometimes the taste displeased, and then the Jovian lightnings struck. Fresh coffee had to be brewed. The trembling and the hush started all over again.

In Uncle's absurd and majestic being it was hard to tell where the thespian left off and the *bon viveur* took over. Aunt knew, and she knew what to do about it. Food was her answer to life's important problems, and her most important was Uncle. If Aunt had been French, her name would have been Escoffier. Whenever things got out of hand and all seemed lost save honor—i.e., Uncle was over at Jezebel's listening to her play his favorite pieces—Aunt played a subtle antiphon with gastronomic variations. The leitmotif may have been ptarmigan or herring salad, but it brought Uncle home on the run. Aunt knew all the Lucullan tricks, including the Scandinavian.

"Uncle, Aunt and Jezebel" is not as good as a circus; it is a circus. Ringmaster Uncle Mathias had a well-trained troupe—a storied cat, a collie,

an array of fish and birds. The star performer was Kurre, a septuagenarian parrot with a literal taste in decor and an ego that matched Uncle's own. Kurre was a scream, as Jezebel was to learn when he shrieked out the one word that could spoil her illicit, if innocent, fun.

Miss Hedman's period piece is the more colorful for its background of Cossacks, golden church cupolas, and the wild music of the steppes. The funnier, too. That mysterious leek-and-onion scented kiss in the dark turned out to be the maid's Russian soldier beau. The success of Uncle's lordly stag parties was three-fourths due to Aunt's culinary prowess and the rest to Uncle's anti-Czarist jokes. Then as now, Russia was a conversation catalyst. "Russians are different," Aunt used to say.

## Short-Story Master

MAUPASSANT: A LION IN THE PATH. By Francis Steegmuller. New York: Random House. 415 pp. \$5.

By HOLLIS ALPERT

MODERN opinions about the work of Guy de Maupassant range from all but complete dismissal to the placing him on a high eminence very close to that reserved for his master, Flaubert. There are some who have considered him the greatest of all the world's short-story tellers (Maugham, for instance, has proclaimed this countless times), while others would more willingly give that mantle to Chekhov. Henry James found the Frenchman "a lion in the

path" for all who wished to extend the limits of that literary form and, perhaps surprisingly, admired the conciseness and brevity and crystal clarity he brought to it. Maupassant has never ceased to be widely read, though not always for sheerly literary reasons, and the French have continued to write about him since the appearance of his first striking story, "Boule de Suif," when he was thirty years old. The facts, the speculations, the fantasies developed around the tragic figure's private and public life have regaled French generations since.

The only previous worth-while American study of Maupassant was brought out by Ernest Boyd in 1926, although Artine Artimian in an interesting published Ph.D. thesis threw some light on the French critical assessment of Maupassant's ten fantastically productive years. Now Francis Steegmuller, who is known for his valuable study of Flaubert, has done a biography which utilizes a well-digested psychoanalytical insight and some unpublished memoir and correspondence material to provide an excellently balanced portrait and a logical theory to account for the preponderance of seduction and adulterous themes in his work.

Mr. Steegmuller sees (accurately, I think) a father figure being constantly destroyed in a great many of the stories and in the novels, too. This figure, under manifold guises, is satirized and mocked and cuckolded. He notes, also, the ever sympathetic treatment of female figures in the fiction, who often have been "crushed, beaten, martyred" by men in their lives. The motivation for this is not far to seek. Guy's mother, Laure, while never divorced from her husband, did not live with him from the time Guy was eleven. She was not actually as sorely beset by the elder Maupassant as the son imagined and Gustave was, if of no remarkable intellectual stature, hardly more than a mild profligate, and often charming in his ways. But Guy grew up under maternal and possessive protection and throughout his forty-three years of life his greatest sympathies and tenderness were reserved for Laure. If he had pursued his father's plan for him he would have wound up as a lawyer or an unobtrusive government clerk, and actually was the latter for a time. However, Laure "understood" her son's sensitive and nervous disposition, and she was the one who gained for him his discipleship under her good friend Flaubert.

"It is a familiar spectacle," writes Mr. Steegmuller, "—the absorption of a sensitive boy by a charming, cultivated, dignified mother not quite in-



Martha Hedman—"cossacks and the wild music of the steppes."

telligent or selfless enough to know or stop what she is doing. Of the two most usual, alternative consequences of such a relationship—physical indifference to women, or promiscuity—Guy from his teens did not display the former.”

The result for Guy was as bitterly ironic as the working out of so many of his tales; from the sustained promiscuity (as might be supposed, with types of women far removed from his mother in attributes and social station) was contracted the disease that destroyed him. Before the syphilis virus made its final inroads on his brain Maupassant was engaged in a continual process, according to Mr. Steegmuller, of shedding artistically, through the tales, his neurotic sicknesses, and as he developed and “cured” himself through this process, the father image took shifting forms.

But the fixation did result in some of the most brilliant short fiction ever to be produced, and it must be given dubious thanks; it is suggested, too, that it might have been the venereal disease itself which so speeded up the workings of Maupassant’s mind. It would be hard to find an example of any writer who produced so furiously and lavishly in so short a time; in little more than a ten-year span he was responsible for more than 200 short and long stories, a half dozen novels (including the masterpieces “Une Vie” and “Pierre et Jean,” and that miserably Hollywoodized “Bel Ami”), plays, and innumerable pieces of the informal essay type which ran in *Gaulois* and *Gil-Blas*, the newspapers he wrote for. The first story, “Boule de Suif,” was worked upon slowly, while still under the formative hand of Flaubert; after that a story would occasionally require no more than a morning’s or afternoon’s work for its execution. It is interesting to see Flaubert complimenting his disciple upon the story of the prostitute’s journey from Rouen to Dieppe, while still maintaining his belief that it would be as a poet Guy would make his reputation.

But the young Maupassant’s rise, from then on, was meteoric. He was adept at getting attention paid to him, and did not hesitate to use important intimates like Flaubert and Zola for help along his way. His resultant fame, the high rates offered by newspapers and publishers, enabled him to leave the employment he despised, his clerkship at the Naval Ministry. He became the equivalent of one of our best-seller authors and had the benefit of a great deal of critical approval as well, not to mention the salacious gossip that sprang up, quite justifiably, around his name.

When he began moving (in between

periods of melancholy solitude) among the higher circles of French society he unfortunately fell afoul of some of the snobbery inherent in those circles. It was this factor, in addition to the hidden virus making its first inroads upon his nervous system, which perhaps accounts for the weaknesses and crude anti-Semitic portrayals in later novels.

There is a highly important addendum that is added to this study—the discovery that many American editions of his work contain (beyond so many abominably poor translations of his stories) as many as sixty-five fake “Maupassant” tales. Thus, much of our public has been led for years to believe this incredibly trashy material belongs to his production. As recently as two years ago an edition appeared which contained fifty of the bogus versions. Also included in the volume

are four hitherto unreprinted stories, never resurrected from the old newspaper files. They are of technical interest only, for none of the four is more than representative.

Mr. Steegmuller makes welcome mention of the fact that “The Necklace” has done much to turn cultivated readers from Maupassant and has given him an unjustified reputation as a specialist in trick endings. Dull-minded anthologists have helped to cause this situation. Readers of the biography will find the author turning their attention to many other “little perfections” which have remained in too much obscurity. It is good to have this volume, to have so graceful and level-headed a writer as Mr. Steegmuller reassessing, redefining a fascinating figure, and so convincingly developing new perspectives upon what we already know of him.

## *Salvaging in and Around Oran*

NO BANNERS, NO BUGLES. By Edward Ellsberg. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 370 pp. \$4.

By FLETCHER PRATT

JUST when Captain Ellsberg got the base at Nassawa in good running condition, as he has so well told in “Under the Red Sea Sun,” the war inconsiderately moved north. On November 24, 1942, he received orders shifting him to General Eisenhower’s command as head salvage officer on the Northern coast of Africa and on the 29th he was in Oran. This is the story of what went on in that harbor and offshore between the date of his arrival and February 3, 1943, when overwork brought on a heart attack that sent him home.

If the events of a little over two months do not seem sufficient to fill a book, the prospective reader is asked to remember what two months they were and who is telling the story. Few people have so well succeeded in investing the details of their daily work with a sense of excitement and suspense; and few jobs will strike one as more worth while than that of taking over a war-damaged and sabotaged harbor which ships cannot even enter, and bringing everything up to an efficiency it had never known.

Of course, Captain Ellsberg’s own passionate interest in seeing things work well has a good deal to do with the manner in which he arouses the interest of spectators at the performance. The sort of thing that fairly makes his heart leap (his own words) is the discovery of an electrically driven power pump aboard

a torpedoed and sinking destroyer, and he makes the reader’s heart leap by the description of the elegant jig-gery-pokery by which he used the machine to bring the ship into harbor. The sort of thing that drives him to a fury in which he wishes to take a machine-gun to every French official in Oran is that a ship in the harbor has been so clumsily shifted as to ruin a half-done salvage job. He is bitter over a British Naval lieutenant who will not help fight the fire aboard a transport, and so furious at the skipper of a cruiser who has abandoned ship after a torpedoing that he uses words which force him to give the vessel a false name, presumably to avoid libel suits.

In short, Ellsberg is one of the builders of earth, a believer in the idea that human ingenuity and hard work can overcome almost any obstacle. The events told here took place during the most tense months of the war, and to the problems solved, new ones were being constantly added by the operations of the German submarines, but the emphasis on the constructive side keeps the book from being just a war book. It is not a narrative of unalloyed success—the captain recounts his failures fully and fairly—but in addition to being a book about fascinating technical achievements, it is a book about people. The skill with which he identifies the men who worked with and under him, or describes the helpful, bumbling, or vigorous action of officials, is perfectly extraordinary. No reader can fail to be interested, though a good many will regret that there is no index.