

# From Pirouettes to Picas

**"Purple Passage: The Life of Frank Leslie," by Madeleine B. Stern** (University of Oklahoma Press, 281 pp. \$3.75), is the first biography of the dancing girl who became one of the most successful magazine publishers in American history. Helen Beal Woodward, who reviews it here, is the author of a recently published collection of sketches of lively ladies, *"The Bold Women."*

By Helen Beal Woodward

THE MEMOIRS of the nineteenth century, growing stained and brittle in library subcellars, seem in no danger of being wholly forgotten so long as Madeleine B. Stern is writing biographies. Miss Stern has blown the dust off stacks of neglected books, in her time. She knows her way around in the nineteenth century like a native, and her bibliographies and fact-crammed prose testify to a scholarship of prodigious patience and integrity.

Her "Life of Margaret Fuller," when it appeared in 1942, annoyed purists by its use of some of the techniques of the novel, but most readers, lacking the prejudices of the professional historian, found this new Margaret miraculously human. In 1950 Miss Stern did it again, with "Louisa May Alcott." She did not put speeches in Louisa's mouth, as she had put them in Margaret's, but her saturation in the literature of the period seeped out in vivid detail. Here was the last word on Louisa Alcott. Indeed, if the book had a fault it was its very definitiveness: one quailed at following the author through Miss Alcott's collected prose works.

In Miss Stern's latest book, "Purple Passage: The Life of Mrs. Frank Leslie," there is the same meticulous tidiness about what for a less careful author would be the little loose ends of research. But "Purple Passage" differs in a number of interesting ways from its predecessors. The period is later, for one thing—Mrs. Leslie lived from 1836 to 1914, and flourished most spectacularly in the Eighties—and the heroine is about as far a cry from Louisa Alcott as absinthe from fudge.

She was born Miriam Florence Folline, but won the legal right to call herself "Frank Leslie." An extraordinary figure, "part man but all

woman," Miss Stern calls her, and tells for the first time the story of the beautiful adventuress from New Orleans who did a sister act in vaudeville with Lola Montez; married a jeweler's clerk, a famous ethnologist, a millionaire publisher, and Oscar Wilde's brother, in that order; inherited a bankrupt publishing empire and made it pay all over again; toured the country as lecturer and wound up "electrifying the world for the last time by leaving two million dollars to woman suffrage."

Getting the facts for any initial biography involves plenty of hard, dull digging. In this case, the task was complicated by the pains Mrs. Leslie had taken to bury certain phases of her past. Doggedly, Miss Stern has tracked down the men in Mrs. Leslie's life, including her shadowy first husband, who married her to protect himself from being sued for seduction, and left her on the spot, and the married bank president and ex-Congressman from Tennessee who shared a house with her in her vaudeville days. It is a remarkable piece of literary detection. (Oddly enough, Miss Stern in the telling tends to use one of the mannerisms of detective fiction, the "little did I dream" gambit. Miriam "could not know . . ." "Although the possibility could never have occurred to her . . ." "Neither of them imagined . . ." "Miriam did not dream that just six or seven months later . . .").

The journals of Margaret Fuller



Mrs. Frank Leslie—"all woman."

and Louisa Alcott gave Miss Stern a chance to get inside her subject in a way that proved impossible in the case of Mrs. Leslie. This is a story told from the outside, looking in. Miss Stern salutes the part of Frank Leslie that was "part man," but she cannot forgive the feline streak, the vanity and opportunism. When the lady publisher interviewed Brigham Young in 1877 she turned on all her sex appeal, and her *Lady's Journal* report implied that President Young had not been unmoved by her charms. Miss Stern's account of the interview is sardonically accurate, but perhaps she does not quite give Mrs. Leslie her due as a journalist. Among the swarms of curious reporters who pried into Mormonism in the 1870's few pried as tactfully and good-humoredly as Mrs. Frank Leslie.

More of Mrs. Leslie's own picture of her times and less of the bric-a-brac of her background might have been fun for the reader; but this is a personal quibble. Miss Stern has written a top-notch biography. Mrs. Leslie has been "done," done with such skill and sagacity that her first biography is very likely to be her last.

## Americana Notes

**QUAKER CITY ARCHITECTURE:** If Professor William P. Harbeson, whose tribute to "Yesteryear in Our Town" in *"Philadelphia Architecture in the Nineteenth Century"* (University of Pennsylvania Press, \$3.50) sets the stage for an unusual monograph, is not already under contract to write a history of the city, there is every reason to suppose that his publishers are guilty of criminal negligence. For it is hard to imagine a more graceful summary than his of the hundred years which ended with the banquets honoring Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, who "read aloud his verse and prose with great unction."

A six-page résumé by Professor David M. Robb of the buildings shown in this amply illustrated volume, a by-product of last season's exhibit at the Philadelphia Art Alliance, is as cogent as it is concise. "Philadelphia," admits Professor Robb, "can offer no buildings of major importance by those architects generally recognized as outstanding in the later nineteenth century." Yet nothing could be more foolish than to overlook what happened in the vicinity of Broad and Market Streets, especially now that we no longer dismiss the inventive contributions of our grandfathers as "aberrations, inconsequential, if not actually inartistic." Surely no one in

his right mind would want to neglect such figures as Louis Sullivan's teacher, Frank Furness, or Wilson Eyre, Jr., who was so happily inspired by William Morris's friend Philip Webb.

Incidentally, if you are not familiar with all of the architects under discussion the fault may not be altogether your own. It is not every day that you can pick up an architectural history like this, a book which all students of the subject will consider essential, and which any one of us with a taste for Philadelphia can enjoy.

—WAYNE ANDREWS.

**YALE'S HOME TOWN:** The account of events in the life of a provincial American city Rollin G. Osterweis gives in *"Three Centuries of New Haven"* (Yale University Press, \$6) is concrete, accurate, and comprehensive. New Haven, one of America's oldest cities (1638), grew slowly from colonial Puritan beginnings to its present rank as fifty-ninth city in the United States, a city of limited industrial expansion and great civic and educational advance. Like the expert historical painter, the author creates a pageant which is colorful, vivid, and interesting. Complemented by superb type design and excellent illustrations, the work sets a new standard for urban history.

But why is it that New Haven's industrial expansion in every period has been so limited and conversely its civic and educational progress so constant? Why is it that the issues which so plague the modern industrial metropolis have so little effect on New Haven? Apparently the even tenor of the city's life takes little heed of racial discrimination, political corruption, labor organization, or banking finance.

Because his emphasis upon the correlation of local and national history yields such impressive results, one wishes that Mr. Osterweis had time to probe into American attitudes and their shadows in the Elm City. The curious vigor of the New Haven inventor, the delicate relationship of town and gown, the familial strength of the city's elite may all be nice variations of a national pattern which demands the sympathy of a lifelong resident and the analysis of a detached scholar to unravel, capacities which Professor Osterweis has amply demonstrated in the present work.

—ANTHONY N. B. GARVAN.

**"AMERICA FIRST":** With more than 800,000 members, most of them in the Chicago Tribune area, the America First Committee led the battle in 1940-41 against intervention by the

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## FICTION

# King Mark's Roving Queen

*"The Enchanted Cup," by Dorothy James Roberts (Appleton-Century-Crofts. 368 pp. \$3.75), is a retelling of the perennially popular romance of Tristram and Iseult.*

By Ben Ray Redman

**I**N *"The Enchanted Cup"* Dorothy James Roberts gives us one more version of a tale that has been written times beyond counting; a tale that was already old when Thomas and Béroul told it in the twelfth century, when Gottfried von Strassburg translated and perfected it in the thirteenth; a tale that is fairly described by its latest publishers as "the most splendid love story of the Western world." Whoever tries to tell this story in these later days issues a brave challenge, and faces an ordeal by comparison. Wagner, in his own medium, survived the test triumphantly. Edwin Arlington Robinson endowed the legend with new poetic beauties and new psychological depths. Hardy's *"The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall"* is but one respectable failure among many. And Miss Roberts?

She has written a prose narrative that should please readers who have little previous acquaintance with Tristram and the two Iseults; and not displease those whose knowledge of the three doomed lovers is considerable. She is good at description, particularly landscape—the marshes of Lyonesse, Tintagel's cliffs, the headlands and green turf of Ireland are visible in her pages. She is competent in the drawing of character. Her dialogue is easy and believable, innocent of studied archaism. Her style in general is unaffected, and never high-flown. Her sense of proportion is usually excellent, her transitions are smooth. She is not bad when it comes to battle, mayhem, and sudden death. But whatever of passion and poetry there may be in *"The En-*



—Bradford Bachrach.

D. J. Roberts—"unaffected."

chanted Cup" is there by inheritance—Miss Roberts has made no contribution of her own.

She has followed, in the main, the tale of Tristram as it is found in Malory's *"Le Morte d'Arthur,"* because, as she says, this rendering "has had more appeal for the present storyteller than earlier, purer versions." Like Malory, and unlike Robinson, she has cheapened the character of King Mark, and thereby made impossible the high tragedy that results when he is depicted as a man of nobility and understanding. Like Malory, and unlike Robinson, she has failed to make the most of the amorous rivalry of Iseult of Ireland and Iseult of Brittany; and she has chosen a version of Tristram's death that robs her of the immortal drama of the white sail and the black. Malory killed off Tristram almost as an afterthought, in the course of a knightly roll call; Miss Roberts kills him in a final paragraph, without dramatic preparation. But she has refused to pass along much of Malory's dross. She has ignored the shabby Segwarides affair, she has not seen fit to have her hero chop off a lady's head at Castle Pleure, and she has spared Tristram and her readers much dull, redundant fighting. She has, to sum it all up, written a novel that should be popular for at least a season—but not, I think, a novel that enters the lists of literature.

