

POOR PILGRIM, POOR STRANGER



William March: "Life is an adventure with an ending."

By ROBERT TALLANT, author of *"Mr. Preen's Salon," "Love and Mrs. Candy,"* and other novels of and about New Orleans.

THERE was a sheet of paper in his typewriter. At the top of it he had typed the heading "Poor Pilgrim, Poor Stranger," and beneath it he had written this paragraph:

The time comes in the life of each of us when we realize that death awaits us as it awaits others, that we will receive at the end neither preference nor exemption. It is then, in that disturbed moment, that we know life is an adventure with an ending, not a succession of bright days that go on forever. Sometimes the knowledge comes with repudiation and quick revolt that such injustice awaits us, sometimes with fear that dries the mouth and closes the eyes for an instant, sometimes with servile weariness, an acquiescence more dreadful than fear. The knowledge that my own end was near came with pain, and afterwards astonishment; with the conventional heart attack, from which, I've been told, I've made an excellent recovery.

So did William March describe, probably as well as any man can, his reactions to his own death. For he did not make that excellent recovery. Early in the morning of May 15, 1954,

presumably within the same day's cycle during which, a writer to the end, he put down the words above, another heart attack occurred.

Hours before Robert Clark, an artist friend, who occupied an apartment in the same house, found the paper in the typewriter he found Bill March. Sleeping in a room directly above March's bedroom, Clark awoke at five-thirty and heard Bill turn over in his bed. At eight o'clock he came downstairs and went into Bill's room. Bill lay with his face buried in his pillow. Afterwards it was decided that he had been dead about an hour. Within a short time after that there was excitement in Dumaine Street in the New Orleans Vieux Carré. First doctors came, then police sirens whined through the narrow street, and at last came the coroner's men. The curious neighbors crowded in front of the cottage as Bill March was carried out, a naked white foot protruding from beneath the white sheet with which the rest of his body was covered.

To many people it seemed a good way to die, quietly in bed, in all probability in his sleep. To many people who knew Bill March it seemed a good time to die. His last book, "The Bad Seed," was a success as novels go, perhaps more successful than any book he had written. It had received glowing reviews; it was on the *Herald Tribune* best-seller list;

it was listed in the "And Bear in Mind" department of *The New York Times* Sunday book section. A few critics had even called "The Bad Seed" an American classic of its kind. Alistair Cooke had said that William March "... is the unrecognized genius of our time." Moreover, Bill had known all this and it had made him happy. It did not matter that in private conversation he had been heard to say that he thought "The Bad Seed" was the worst book he had ever written. What seemed most important to him was that within the last few years he had accomplished what might be called a writing comeback after a decade of writing almost nothing.

ALSO it seemed to many persons that Bill March's life had been both full and successful. At sixty years of age he was wealthy. He had not made his money as an author, to be sure, but his writing had brought him fame in critical circles, with readers of the sort whose approval mattered most to him, and among other writers. There is even a possibility that it may be an enduring fame. His admirers have remained persistent. They recall short stories he wrote twenty-five years ago. He knew that this was so. For instance, when Martha Foley included none of his work in her "Best of the Best" there were protests to

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The Silence of Conscience

"The Fall of a Titan," by Igor Gouzenko (translated by Merwyn Black. W. W. Norton. 629 pp. \$4.50), a novel by the code clerk of the Soviet Embassy at Ottawa who broke an international spy ring, tells the story of an idealistic young professor revolted by the brutality of the masters of Russian Communism.

By Ben Ray Redman

"THE FALL OF A TITAN" has a double claim upon our interest. It is an excellent novel in its own right, and its author is famous. While we are reading it we cannot forget for long that its author is Igor Gouzenko, the Soviet Embassy code clerk who broke with his masters, made off with more than a hundred secret documents, and thereby destroyed a Russian spy ring that was active in Canada, the United States, and Great Britain. While we are reading we are constantly aware that the fiction which is passing under our eyes is solidly grounded in fact.

Mr. Gouzenko is a child of the revolution—he was born two years after the ten days that shook the world—but, like many other Soviet novelists, he has modeled his work on the spacious patterns that so well served the great novelists of Czarist Russia. His book has a scope and a sweep and a vitality that are conspicuously lacking in much of today's English and American fiction, which now seems to be increasingly in the hands of self-conscious artists who are determined to write more and more about less and less.

It has, too, the virtue of being an authoritative revelation of the human elements that animate the totalitarian power which has declared war on the non-Communist world. We have met some of these characters before, but Mr. Gouzenko makes them live again, both as individuals and as types. And in Mikhail Gorin (read Maxim Gorky) he has added a figure of weight and

stature to the gallery of Russian literature.

THE titan of the title is Gorin. The instrument of the Soviet rulers who are determined to control Gorin, by means short of murder or by murder itself, is Feodor Novikov, a young professor of history in Rostov University, who is also an increasingly trusted and important agent of the NKVD. The time of the action is the middle 1930's, when "Stalin was imposing collectivization on the country . . . This period will remain everlastingly the darkest blot on the human conscience. For millions of wholly innocent persons this policy meant death from starvation, the firing squad, torture, and exile to concentration camps." It was a period calculated to give pause to Gorin, the great writer, the idol of the Russian masses, the champion of the people, "the stormy petrel of the revolution," the utopian idealist, the international spokesman for Bolshevism. It was a period calculated to make him search his soul, review his beliefs, and—however reluctantly—take some cognizance of the facts that surrounded him. It was a period in which Gorin found it impossible to speak with his old confidence of the blessings and glories of Communism. So he fell comparatively silent, and when he did so Stalin and the Politburo quickly decided that something must be done, and done quickly, about Mikhail Gorin. "The Fall of a Titan" is, centrally, the story of what was done—and of what the doing did to the doer, Feodor Novikov.

Feodor is a "hard-as-stone Bolshevik," a dedicated servant of the new order, a martyr-hero of a godless religion, from the bloody rites of which—despite violent gusts of secret disbelief—he finds it impossible to withdraw. He is also a hollow man; hollow because he drains himself of himself, by making every possible personal sacrifice for the sake of an impersonal, monstrous, monolithic state.

Absorbing and powerful, this remarkable "first novel" would also be an exceptionally horrifying novel, had we not grown so used to horrors. A note of hope is, indeed, voiced at the end; but its sound is faint in competition with the thunder of present reality. It is this thunder that we hear after the book has been put down.



THE AUTHOR: Igor Gouzenko began his career as a front-page disgrace to the Kremlin in September 1945, only a month after Hiroshima. Gouzenko, a twenty-six-year-old graduate of Moscow's Military Intelligence School, had spent two years as a code clerk in the Soviet Embassy in Ottawa when he decided to walk out on the USSR with 109 secret documents stuffed under his shirt. Unwrapped, these reports and memorandums represented the first pieces of evidence of a Soviet atom spy ring in North America. They disclosed that Dr. Allan Nunn May, a physicist whose subsequent conviction led to Fuchs and the Rosenbergs, had tipped off the Russians about our A-bomb experiments and had even passed along a sample or two of uranium. As for Gouzenko, he, his wife, and their two children were promptly absorbed into Canada's day-to-day life under assumed names (his boy and girl don't even know they are little Gouzenkos). Someone from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police is always within shouting distance, just in case. In his disguise as just another Iron Curtain refugee, Gouzenko became a writer and, "somewhere in Canada" the other day, he discussed how he'd gone from dabbling in short stories in his youth to "The Fall of a Titan." "When I was a pupil in Russia I wrote good compositions," he began proudly. "One about a boy becoming a famous violinist was particularly praised by my teachers. I was then in the fifth grade, about eleven years old." His memoirs, "The Iron Curtain," followed in 1948 when he was about twenty-nine. He spent four years on "The Titan"—one looking for a subject, three in the writing. It was turned down by a half-dozen American publishers before Norton accepted it last fall, unaware that Igor Gouzenko was the Igor Gouzenko. Not long afterwards the Jenner Committee went to Canada to discuss the espionage business with Gouzenko, and his picture appeared on the front pages. His head was in a hood.

—BERNARD KALB.

