



Herald. Maybe Mr. Kofoed has written a new book in "Moon Over Miami" (Random House, \$3.50). Maybe not. Readers will find it hard to tell, for these pages give the impression that he has clipped a lot of old daily columns, tossed them wildly in the air, and pasted them together in the order they floated down. He leaps from anecdote to anecdote with wild abandon, without transition or apparent sequitur. And can Jack tell dud stories? Space prevents proof of it here, but he can take hundreds of words to lead up to some of the soggiest punch lines we've read anywhere. Still, his punch lines are easily outshone by his similes. "The years have slithered by like pigs on a greased slide," he writes on one page. Again: "The hurricane lashed boarded windows like Jack Dempsey beating on Jess Willard's aching jaw." For collectors of such literary gems, "Moon Over Miami" will be a rare delight, but to the rest of us it will give no idea of Miami, but only of a columnist free-wheeling at the typewriter.

—ALLEN CHURCHILL.

FRASER YOUNG'S
LITERARY CRYPT NO. 658

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 658 will be found in the next issue.

GVKKZ, EJA EJNKFT ZIV
SAPAPCAS—BKL EJA
EJNKFT ZIV LIK'E. . . "BOO
BCIVE AUA."
MITAQJ O. PBKHNA XNDY.

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 657

Self-restraint is feeling your
oats without sowing them.
—SHANNON FIFE.

Age of the Aspidistra

A new surge of interest in the Victorian Era in Great Britain and this country has occasioned the publication of three books: "Victorian People," by Asa Briggs (University of Chicago Press. 312 pp. \$5), "Victorian Vista," by James Laver (Houghton Mifflin. 256 pp. \$5.50), and "Victorian Song," by Maurice Willson Disher (Macmillan. 256 pp. \$4.50). George Woodcock, author of "The Paradox of Oscar Wilde," considers the books and the age below.

By George Woodcock

TWENTY YEARS ago the Victorian age seemed as outmoded as the tables with mother-of-pearl inlaid and the tinkling prismatic lusters that gathered dust in attics or stood unsold in the back premises of antique shops. Lytton Strachey had probed ironically into the characters of its heroes and heroines and found them wanting; political writers had blamed the blindness of its statesmen for the international agonies of the twentieth century; in art and music and literature it had been dismissed as the heyday of Philistinism. To anyone in those days who prided himself on taste and intellectual discrimination the age of the unmerry widow seemed as dreary as its symbolic plant, the aspidistra.

Today the tide has changed and the Victorian Revival is in full spate. The lustres and the inlaid tables have been polished up and sold at prices that would have shocked their original owners, Victorian songs echo in London little theatres for the benefit of the very people who not so long ago hailed Strachey as an iconoclastic prophet, and nineteenth-century academic painters like Mulready are arousing an interest such as they have not enjoyed since the days, seventy years ago, when Whistler and Wilde began to destroy the pretensions of anecdotal art.

And on a more serious level, Victorian writers, politicians, and leaders of social movements are being given a sympathetic consideration that has been denied them for many years, so that, after having despised the Victorians, we are now inclined to go to the other extreme of regarding them as giants of personality beside whom

our contemporaries seem cramped and stunted.

Three new books—"Victorian People," by Asa Briggs, "Victorian Vista," by James Laver, and "Victorian Song," by Maurice Willson Disher, are all in their various ways manifestations of this contemporary tendency to appreciate rather than to criticize the Victorians.

Mr. Briggs deals with a more limited subject than his title suggests; he takes the zenith of the nineteenth century, from the Great Exhibition of 1851 to Disraeli's Reform Bill of 1867, and shows the relationship between the dominant ideas of the time and the men who now seem its most typical personalities—men as varied as Bright and Trollope, as Robert Applegarth, the Trade Unionist, and Thomas Hughes, the prose laureate of the public schools. Mr. Laver has gathered, and garnished with commentary, an anthology of Victorian ephemerae in writing and illustration, under the theory that "surface pattern can sometimes reveal the depths" and that "out of unconsidered trifles" one can "build up a picture of an Age." Willson Disher, a Victorian aficionado who has clearly never bowed the knee to Strachey, goes on a sentimental excursion into his own youth, when the almost legendary stars of the nineteenth-century music halls were still in full career and when every respectable home echoed to the twang of the upright piano and the full-throated singing of "In the gloaming" and "Alice, where art thou?"

THE points of view expressed implicitly in these books differ so widely as to emphasize that the Victorian Revival is a more complex phenomenon than it appears at first sight. There is, of course, an element of precious faddism in some of its manifestations which is as shallow and pretentious as the fashionable Gothicism that reached its height among the Victorians themselves in the famous Eglinton tournament, when nineteenth-century gentlemen got into armor and knocked each other off their horses in an excess of antiquarian enthusiasm. There is also the envy with which we look back on an era when an income tax of a shilling in the pound was regarded as disastrous, when war seemed to the unmilitary at least—an affair of Light Brigades and thin red lines of heroes, when the streets smelled of

ammonia rather than gasoline, and when Karl Marx was merely another of the bearded oddities of the British Museum Reading Room. But, beyond the fashionable cultism and the nostalgia which men always feel for ages whose problems are different from—if not less than—their own, there is a genuine realization among students of the nineteenth-century, whether from a literary or a social viewpoint, that the condemnatory attitude of the Twenties and Thirties was unbalanced and unjust.

What the prewar critics of Victorianism tended to see, to the virtual exclusion of other aspects of the century, was the extraordinary Philistinism embodied in the attitudes of the commercial middle class, whose phenomenal rise in numbers and prosperity made it in some ways the most vital class of the Victorian age. In its worship of money and its social snobbery, in its ironbound respectability and its intolerant fundamentalism, this class expressed those faults of the age which Wilde, and Shaw in imitation of him, stigmatized as the seven deadly virtues, and in *Victoria* these characteristics of her bourgeois subjects were personified almost to caricature. But it would be as foolish to assume that the Queen epitomized all her age as it would be to suggest that the Czar epitomized the Russia of Tolstoy or Napoleon III the France of Baudelaire. Indeed, far from this being true, the Victorian age owed its extraordinary dynamism to the presence of great conflicting forces within its own life. It was, after all, the Victorians themselves who, in a few decades, carried out vast reforms in their industrial, educational, and parliamentary systems, while all the powerful progressive forces in Britain today—the Labour Party, the Trade Unions, the Co-operative movement—sprang from the soil of nineteenth-century working-class radicalism.

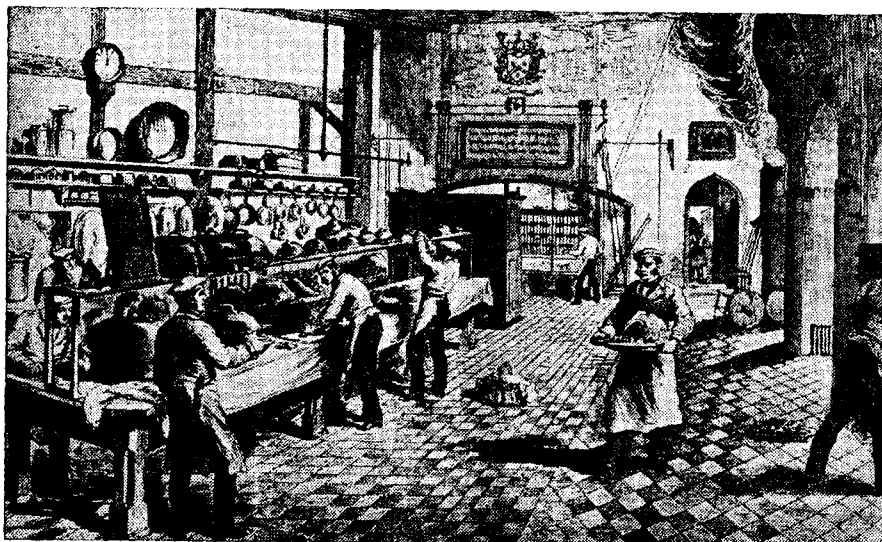
In "Victorian People" Asa Briggs draws attention to this dualism of the Victorian world, and shows it appearing in some very unexpected places. His book begins with a study of the Great Exhibition of 1851, and Paxton's masterpiece, the Crystal Palace, emerges, not merely as a symbol of Victorian megalomania, but also as a token of the era's idealism and of its internationalist hopes. Mr. Briggs goes on to discuss a number of men who, in their various fields, were as typical as the Crystal Palace of mid-Victorian tendencies, and he shows that almost all of them carried the basic Victorian conflict between idealistic and material motives right into their own lives and ideas. It is enlightening to be reminded, for instance, that Samuel Smiles, the author of "Self-Help," was



Aubrey Beardsley. Photo.



"Saturday Night at the Victoria Theatre."



—Illustrations from "Victorian Vista."

Charterhouse Kitchen, 1867.



"THE SIX-MARK TEAPOT" (1880).

ESTHETIC BRIDEGROOM: "It is quite consummate, is it not?"

INTENSE BRIDE: "It is indeed! Oh Algenon, let us live up to it."



"The Beloved," c. 1860. Photo. London Stereoscopic Co.

no mere advocate of selfish acquisitiveness; on the contrary, he denounced laissez-faire as "a dreadful theory" and demanded a higher status for the working man. It is also pleasant to recollect that the author of "Tom Brown's Schooldays," far from being an old-school-tie conservative, was one of the little group of enlightened parliamentarians who worked successfully to gain recognition for the growing trades union movement.

But behind the gallery of significant individuals whom Mr. Briggs has chosen to represent the Victorian age at its zenith one is always conscious of Victorian people in another sense, of a populace acutely and urgently concerned with political affairs and even with abstract principles of right. Foreign exiles who availed themselves of the political asylum which Britain maintained during the nineteenth century were often surprised by the apparent contrast between the stuffiness of British life and the feeling that was aroused by issues of freedom and justice. Throughout the mid-nineteenth-century the people of England were demonstratively conscious of topical issues; at this time the suffrage was still limited, but the Victorian working men realized the value of popular demonstrations by the voteless, and as Mr. Briggs suggests, there is no doubt that the great Hyde Park gatherings of the Sixties and the two hundred thousand Birmingham people who gathered to support John Bright in 1866 did more than any amount of parliamentary maneuvering to precipitate the passing of the Reform Bill which brought the franchise to the urban workers. The men who acted in this way were certainly not the stuffy Victorians of the customary stereotypes.

Mr. Briggs shows us the Victorians through the eyes of an intelligent and persuasive historian of our own day. James Laver, in "Victorian Vista," shows them as they saw themselves, and the picture is not always pleasant. The inhuman strictness of much Victorian family life; the harsh conditions under which factory children, seamstresses, and shop assistants worked and lived—and all too often died before their time; the absurd etiquette with which the middle-class circumscribed their lives and the villainous over-eating and over-dressing they imposed upon themselves—all these make for uncomfortable and at times horrifying reading, for Mr. Laver has conscientiously shown us the shadow as well as the sunlight of nineteenth-century England, the world of Doré as well as that of Frith.

At the same time, he makes clear that those who denounced and often succeeded in eliminating the social

abuses of the age were Victorians themselves, and his selections also show abundantly that the Victorians were not always the monsters of smug seriousness we have often imagined them. Some of the humor of "Victorian Vista" is, indeed, unintended, as when a manual of good behavior, after laying down strictly the correct way to greet a lady and the limitations on smoking in public, breaks unexpectedly into the exhortation: "Don't expectorate on the sidewalk. Go to the curbstone and discharge the saliva into the gutter." But much of the fun is deliberate, and shows that the Victorians had a faculty for laughing at themselves and each other that went far beyond the pages of *Punch*.

Yet the fact remains that sentimentality, the deliberate cultivation of emotions for their own sake, was grossly prevalent throughout the age. Few even of its best writers were free from the tendency to luxuriate in spurious excesses of feeling; it exists in the cynic Wilde as much as in the frankly sentimental Marie Corelli. But it seems to reach its height in the popular arts of the theatre and the drawing room, and Mr. Disher's book is heavily loaded with examples of atrocious mawkishness. Yet "Victorian

Song" is by no means all gaslight's glitter, or little yellow birds, or songs of Araby. With the somewhat verbose and undisciplined enthusiasm of a life-long amateur, Mr. Disher leads us through the repertoire of our vocal grandparents, and shows that, even in their entertainments, the Victorians could combine with sentimentality an amazing facility for absurd and often grimly realistic comedy. In both fields, indeed, they excelled their successors. The nostalgic tearfulness of their ballads has maintained a tenacious hold over the memories of most English people, and the comic songs of their music halls have rarely been rivalled in our century as examples of popular humor. George Orwell once said that he would sooner have written "Come where the booze is cheaper" than "The Blessed Damozel." Perhaps this viewpoint is extreme, but it is impossible to read Mr. Disher's chapters on the music-hall singers of the nineteenth century without the feeling that Victorian England, even if it was not so quaintly attractive as its faddish enthusiasts are now inclined to maintain, was a vast deal more full of life and liveliness than we allowed ourselves to believe during the revolt of the Twenties.

Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich

HEAR YE! HEAR YE!

Fannie Gross, of Asheville, North Carolina, asks you to identify ten literary characters who stood before the bar of justice. If you can name no more than six, it's a conviction; seven or eight is a hung jury, and nine or ten an acquittal. Verdict on page 37.

1. On trial for attempted kidnapping and aiding larceny, this traveling salesman pleaded his own case in such an amusing fashion that the judge took time out for phoning his wife to bring her sewing to the courtroom.

2. In a breach of promise suit the jury fined him seven hundred and fifty pounds which he refused to pay, preferring jail instead.

3. During this man's trial, the husband of the woman he was accused of murdering appeared to plead for the defendant, but the hysterical crowd in the courtroom prevented his speaking.

4. Because he cursed the name of his native land when he was being tried for treason, he was doomed to spend the rest of his life as a circumnavigating exile.

5. The eloquence of a renowned orator saved this New England farmer from paying a debt to the Devil.

6. The trial of this Indian doctor was interrupted by the announcement that the Englishwoman whose testimony would clear him had been smuggled out of the country.

7. During this Russian's trial for the murder of his father, a revengeful woman produced a letter written by the accused wherein he threatened th patricide.

8. This German banker was tried before a mysterious court for a crime the nature of which he never knew even up to the time he was murdered.

9. He escaped sentence for jilting his fiancée when the judge decided to marry the girl himself.

10. When this chauffeur was being tried for the murder of his employer daughter, his crime was reconstructed in the courtroom, including the furnace where the victim's body had been burned.