

groom who is lured to the bar rather than to the bed, Mrs. Taylor's artistry and understanding are combined to produce a thoroughly effective piece of fiction.

Basic man-woman relationships are the essence of most of these stories: the buried life of a middle-aged wife, the gnawing frustration of a young girl married to an older man, the final separation of two lovers. If such stories of aloneness and withdrawal are permeated with the crab-apple tang of desperate melancholy, Mrs. Taylor can also depict scenes of robust humor, as she does in "The True Primitive," in which a self-educated lock-keeper proves to be an immovable obstacle in the path of his son's courting. As robust as a Daumier drawing, the story explodes into rollicking laughter.

Quiet and unsensational, "The Blush" is an impressive and moving collection.

Year of Infamy

"St. Petersburg," by Andrey Biely; translated by John Cournos (Grove, 310 pp. \$4.75), is a comic novel about the world of high conspiracy and intrigue in Russia of 1905. Robert Payne, who has translated the poetry of Boris Pasternak, is the author of "The Terrorists," among many other books.

By Robert Payne

IN HIS long poem "The Year 1905" Boris Pasternak contemplated with a kind of sad bitterness the desolation of Russia in a year of defeat, famine, and revolution. Over the czar hung the shadow of the terrorist Nechayev; over the workmen and the peasants hung the knout and the death warrant. But as he spoke of the hanging of students, the mutiny in the Black Sea, and the coming storm, Pasternak, while deeply moved by the plight of his country, was able to see that year very much as Yeats saw 1916. A terrible beauty was born, and it was the task of the poet to celebrate the beauty of those terrible days.

Andrey Biely saw it otherwise. He was a distinguished poet whose poems are filled with flashes of forked lightning; he had no patience with cultivated humanism. For him 1905 was a year of stark horror. His famous novel, "St. Petersburg," now at last translated into English, describes the events of that year with savagery and wild laughter directed as much against the incompetent ministers as against the bungling terrorists. Im-

agine a mixture of Rabelais and Dostoevski and you have something of the flavor of this wonderful, grotesque, sad, wicked, and fabulous book.

It is a poet's novel, and therefore there is no story, no plot, and very little characterization. It hardly matters, for the principal character in the book is a sardine tin. This most charming and unforgettable sardine tin is introduced into the house of Apollon Apollonovich Ableukov, the minister of state: a pudgy, pompous man who smells of eau de cologne, is terribly afraid of being assassinated as he goes through the streets in his carriage, and always upholds the virtues of thrift, benevolence, and authoritarian government. Ableukov is something of a caricature, but he is so superbly vigorous a caricature that he rings true. His son, Nikolai, is a halfhearted revolutionary wearing pince-nez, and it is through Nikolai that the sardine tin, which contains a time bomb, is introduced into the house. Nikolai does not know he has the bomb; he thinks it is a sardine tin.

Nothing at all happens in the novel except the wildest improvisation. The conspirators around Nikolai conspire. The minister administers. A revolutionary attempts to hang himself, but only succeeds in dislodging the hook

from the ceiling and bruising the two fingers he had carefully inserted between his neck and the rope. The minister goes on odd little errands of mercy, protecting the virtue of the young women of the capital. Meanwhile, the sardine tin is ticking away, and in the end of course it does explode, doing very little harm: for the harm has already been done in the savage caricature of the minister, his effete sons, and the ludicrous conspirators. Biely keeps the ball in the air by swiping at it savagely and at the same time good-humoredly. It is the oddest of combinations, but in his hands it is a singularly successful one.

Here, then, at long last is one of the great comic novels of our time, inhabiting that strange and rarely explored area where farce and tragedy meet. Why it should have to wait for so many years to be translated (Biely wrote it in 1912) is something of a puzzle, but we should be grateful to John Cournos for making it available now. Biely is insanely difficult to translate, and Cournos has done his job well.

QUEEN'S MAN: "Consort for Victoria" (Doubleday, \$3.95) is the third volume of a Vaughan Wilkins trilogy about the early years of Queen Vic-



An Income Tax Man.



A Rocking Boy.



Incumbent sans Piano.



A Lady of the Streets.



An Aging Actress.



A Literary Man.

"TIMES HAVE CHANGED, but hardship and dark corners still remain," writes Alex Atkinson in "The Big City" (Braziller, \$3.95). Ronald Searle is the deft illustrator of this series from the pages of *Punch*, parodying Henry Mayhew's Victorian manual, "London's Labour and the London Poor." Among the witty words and adroit pictures is a serious glimpse into the heart of a rising class in metropolitan society, London's New Poor.

Dreams Dreamed

By Kay Boyle

SPRING birds wing to the feeding tray
As Bowery bums wing to a bar. Their wings
Are slick as worn-out sleeves. They sing,
Both birds and bums, melodiously and grievously.
Their feet are thin. Both species wing
To seed and drink with lidless eyes.

Could I but strew in with the sun-flower seeds
That wild beaks seek, the dreams
Contained within the egg-shell skulls of bums,
Would I not be both bird and bum, and seed and drink,
And grief and melody? Would I not see
With equal clarity the morning star,
And the glass left empty at the corner bar?

toria's reign. The two preceding books were "And So—Victoria" and "Seven Tempest."

Prince Albert came in for more than his share of skulduggery. To those who affectionately regard this amiable Prince Consort as merely a fortunate fellow who shared Victoria's throne and lived a gracious life, this horrendous story of the seditious enemies who plotted against him and his marriage is an adventure behind the scenes.

It is a romantic story and a well-written one. Mr. Wilkins has a rare talent for creating a live atmosphere. His descriptions of England in the early nineteenth century, its cities and towns, the streets and particularly the interiors of the houses, is convincing of his intensive research of the period. He seems to take great pleasure in describing the intricate and colorful costumes of the day.

The plot is intricate, too. Enemies of Victoria planned a daring scheme to prove, by falsifications of every nature, that Albert was an illegitimate member of the House of Saxe-Coburg and thereby to blackmail Victoria into relinquishing her throne to Ernest of Hanover. Albert appears only in the last chapter and Victoria in the epilogue, so the entire story deals with the characters involved in the infamous plot and with the loyal subjects who ultimately discredit the ringleaders.

The heroes are most heroic and the villains get their comeuppance. The heroine, Fancy Eves, is a beautiful, enterprising, gay creature—a grandmother at the age of twenty-eight—and a spunky lady of virtue. The hero, Major Richard Houldway, takes far longer than the reader to realize his steadfast affections for Fancy.

Throughout the mysterious comings and goings, evil doings and heroisms, runs a thread of bright and sometimes

lusty humor. The many incidental bits of information in the book I found almost more entertaining than the plot. Did you know, for instance, that rubbing a nutmeg between the fingers—and it must be a *female* nutmeg—is a sure-fire amulet against rheumatic ills?

—MARGARET HURLEY.

RAT'S-EYE VIEW: In "Cadwallader" (Harper, \$3), which the author, Russell Lynes, describes as "A Diversion," he has set up a more or less impartial observer to watch the carryings-on of urban and suburban people, and to try to reach some conclusion about their antics. It is an extremely difficult book to describe, beyond saying that it has moments of great charm and penetrating humor, and the fact that the observer happens to be a rat should in no way lessen its universal appeal.

Take, for instance, the way in which Cadwallader (the rat) records the proceedings at a country-club dance, to which he has gained access with the help of a bar-rat friend named Benny de Menthe:

This was a ritual with glasses, tall and short, and it appeared to be a competition to see who could talk loudest soonest. It was obviously hard work, because they seemed very tired when they got through and sometimes had trouble walking. . . . It was a contest that made some people love each other very much and others hate each other, and now and then a man and a woman would stray off the porch to a bunker and wrestle. In such contests the men always seemed to be winning at first but the women were stronger in the long run.

Cadwallader's primary urge, however, is to be more than a mere observer; he wants to develop an Einstein-like formula that will sum up

the whole problem of money, a commodity about which he has heard and which seems to be very important to people, but one which he has never been able to define with anything like the simplicity of Einstein's $E=mc^2$. To report that he finally succeeds in producing the irrefutable formula $M=C^2$ is in no way a giveaway of the plot, any more than it is to say that his intellectual struggles are a considerable headache to his wife Deborah and their nine children, who are named Pitcher, Catcher, First, Second, Third, Short, Left, Center, and Right. As I said, there is a great deal more to "Cadwallader" than can be told in any summary.

—NATHANIEL BENCHLEY.

DEATH-IN-LIFE: Some fifty miles from London in a once-rural valley lives a colony of lower-professional-class families, "stockbrokers and dentists, company directors and chartered accountants, directors of advertising agencies and manufacturers of plastic." Most of the men spend the week in London, often with mistresses. As depicted in Penelope Mortimer's novel, "Cave of Ice" (Harcourt, Brace, \$3.95), life is a ritual of ugly, empty display, and children are pawns in the prestige game, the third child conceived to show that you can afford it. All human relationships, all emotional development are "paralyzed by triviality."

Ruth, alone all week and lonelier at weekends, married Rex because she was pregnant. Rex is gross, cruel, and insensitive, and Ruth, now hopeless, is incapable of love, even to her children. But Angela, the eldest child, is pregnant by just such a young man as Rex once was, and Ruth must rouse herself from her torpor to arrange an abortion so that Angela, as unresponsive to the human claims of the unborn as to the living, may be spared. Ruth, with a supreme effort, makes what she believes will be the liberating act of love and tells Angela how she was born. But it is too late, or perhaps it would never have mattered. Angela, freed of her burden, frees herself from her home.

"Cave of Ice" is a sad, informative, competent novel. It is immensely illuminating on the attitude of the intelligent novelist to the life Mrs. Mortimer describes, a life that is, to the intelligent novelist, more hated than any other in England. To the intelligent novelist, this is the nightmare death-in-life, and to make it the setting for a serious novel is readily to chill our blood to the cold.

But hatred alone is sterile, and Mrs. Mortimer's hatred is never tempered with pity. Everyone in her book is horrible, insufficient, and incapable