

FOR FAR TOO LONG, evidence of women's existence was absent from cultural history, even from much of literature. Like blacks, women were invisible. But the injustice is being corrected. Indeed, it sometimes seems *overcorrected*. We are now deluged with periodicals, letters, diaries, biographies, and autobiographies written by obscure women who have gained recognition primarily (sometimes entirely) because they are female.

Lella Secor: A Diary in Letters 1915–1922 (Burt Franklin/Artemis Books, \$14.95 cloth, \$5.95 paper) is a case in point. Born in the Midwest in 1887, Lella Secor traveled to the West Coast, became a journalist, and then went east in 1915 to sail aboard Henry Ford's peace ship, the *Oscar II*. She was a convinced pacifist, and so she became one of "a body of unofficial delegates to Europe," joining "representatives of other neutral countries in a conference designed to establish continuous mediation of the conflicts in Europe."

In the letters in this volume, written to her sisters and mother, Lella tells of her sea voyage, the other "pilgrims," the activities in Europe for peace, and her later work against armed preparedness in the United States. Aboard ship she meets the publisher Benjamin W. Heusch, about whom she is very enthusiastic, but her feelings about her host are ecstatic: "Henry Ford is a prince among men."

Lella Secor is a mistress of the cliché and a writer of curious, uninformative, flat, superlative-laden prose. What is worse, she has a way of tantalizing us by mentioning exciting events and important ideas, then leaving them without further enlightenment. "Last night," she writes to her mother from New York, where she went to work as a freelance journalist in 1916, "I staid all night with Anne because Hiram was away. We got into a shooting fray down in the Italian quarter which was quite exciting. Both of us had all sorts of thrills from our experience." End of information.

Everyone she meets is "fine," every hour spent with these "fine people" is "perfect," every speech she hears is "peerless." She does not "go off on a suffrage tangent" because she is too involved in trying to stop the war. Later, Lella marries an Englishman, moves to Cambridge, and becomes active in the

birth control movement.

Dealing cursorily with great events and filled with trivia, the letters make this reader wonder if such insignificant chatter throws light on anything but the shallow mind of one letter-writing young woman. Burt Franklin & Co. promises five more volumes of diaries and first-person accounts in its American Women's Diary Series. I only hope the quality and interest of subsequent volumes improve.

The Feminist Press (Box 334, Old Westbury, New York 11568) on the other hand has recently put out a remarkable book of letters, *The Maimie Papers* (\$15.95 cloth, \$6.95 paper), written by Maimie Pinzer Benjamin, a young, half-Jewish girl from an unhappy family who became a prostitute for lack of money, training, or education.

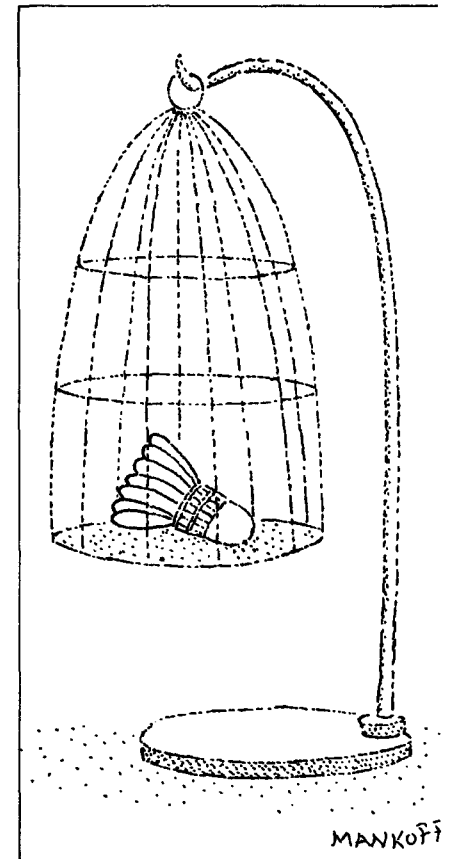
Maimie was befriended by Fanny Quincy Howe, a Boston aristocrat, to whom she wrote these 24 letters between 1910 and 1922. They are indeed documents of the hidden life of women in those years, written by an extraordinary woman. Maimie gave up prostitution, became a secretary, went into business for herself in Montreal, and when she felt the hostility of the male business community, made her apartment into a halfway house for young would-be and actual prostitutes.

Maimie writes well. Her letters evoke from us an overwhelming sympathy and affection for her as a sensitive, talented woman caught in and yet able to rise above the exigencies of lower-class life. Herbert Welsh, a Philadelphia social worker, helped and advised her as she struggled through a series of afflictions—not least the loss of an eye to syphilis—to establish herself in a more respectable life, but even he exhibited a strong male bias. Maimie writes to Mrs. Howe:

I got a hat and turned it myself.... To me it does not look loud, as I haven't even drawn the ribbon all around the hat, but just made the bow. And I thought Mr. Welsh would like it.... But just as I was dressing, I decided to put on the little blue hat—but then didn't, as it seemed like petty conceit—and put on the large one.... Mr. Welsh remarked that I dressed too loud. So I said I had on only the dress you sent—the dotted one. Then he said the dress was all right, but the hat was frightful.... He told me he thought I ought

to go to a hospital and let them try to make it possible for me to wear a glass eye. Really, if I thought there was half a chance, wouldn't I be only too glad?—but it is impossible... for I have no eyelids, or lashes, or anything that looks like anything that generally holds an eye in place... and yet Mr. Welsh said I should go regardless of what I personally think, as long as he wanted me to.

Without ever complaining or crying out against the injustice of the patriarchal world in which she lives, Maimie gives us more than enough poignant detail to make us see vividly her world and the gallantry of her spirit. She was not trying to "make it" in the traditional American sense of attaining riches or power but turned her energies instead to helping other women like herself. Fanny Quincy Howe left these letters to her daughter, the novelist Helen Howe, who gave them to Radcliffe's Schlesinger Library. Ruth Rosen has written an informative introduction to them, and the text was edited by Sue Davidson. A work of genuine interest, value, and even—that nice, outdated word—edification. ●



SATURDAY REVIEW: PLEASURES

Oh, Cuisine!/Tied to the Steak

by Gordon Lish

LIKE EVERY interesting American, I live in New York City—and like every resident New Yorker, I never eat at home. My four children range in age from six to twenty-two, and insofar as memory serves me, I do not hazard the slightest exaggeration when I state that not one of those children has ever been obliged to suffer the experience of a home-cooked meal. It's true that once in a blue moon one of them gets a trifle foolish about some crazy American claim for "wholesomeness," and when the kid gets really disgusting about it, the missus comes across with a Uneeda Biscuit and a couple of fingers of Coke. We let him eat it squatting in front of the wall where the fireplace would be if we had one, and that shuts the kid's trap up for 8 to 10 months easy.

The point is, what do I eat and where do I like to eat it when I go to all the New York restaurants I am always going to? The answer to the first question is steak, and the one or two to the second is Christ Cella or Peter Luger, seeing as how it depends on whether it's sirloin or porterhouse I want in the picture.

Christ Cella is set up in midtown Manhattan, and it looks like hell inside and out, which is okay by me since that probably runs off a lot of foot traffic and keeps the daters out. Mainly it's your serious eaters you're going to discover at their edibles in there, and if you factor in how they've got all those waiters in wraparound aprons and how those brutes of men have got to deliver the stuff to your table on pretty stout carts, that's atmosphere enough—unless you're an interior decorator or worse.

So far as the ordering goes, the way I see it there's only one thing to get yourself in a state about, and that's in the potato department. You've got the home fries and you've got the shoestring fries, and if you can make up your mind about these without changing it too many times, you're in business. Listen, I'll make it safe for you. You equivocate at Christ Cella at your own risk, since your average Christ Cella waiter is not exactly the sort of type you want to go changing things around on too much.

Me, it's the shoestring fries and the sirloin and a spinach salad on the side—and the same goes for every last

member of my family, except once in a while I let the wife slip in a baked potato just to prove I'm a sport. Personally, I don't see any reason to stand in the way of the Women's Movement if all it costs me is a baked potato every once in a while.

Let's not talk about the dessert too much because here's where you could make a strong man cry. I don't know what you've had in the way of a napoleon in your life, but you haven't until you've had the little number Christ Cella features. If you don't mind, I think I'm going to take that up a notch and declare that you haven't even had *dessert* until you've had the thing I'm talking about. I'm sorry—I can't risk talking about it any more: My six-year-old is standing here as I type this, and I don't think it's healthy for the kid to see me come apart before he has children of his own.

Anyhow, that's it and that's it for Christ Cella, except to warn you to call up about six months in advance. Meaning, the word is out, and it's been out for long enough you've even got Canadians trying to get into the place—and they've got the edge on you, seeing as how it's through CARE and the Red Cross that they make their reservations.

Peter Luger is another story altogether. Here you've got what you might call atmosphere, but I wouldn't get carried away about it if I were you. I mean, what you've got is more like color than atmosphere, what with some old lamps on the walls and scrubbed wood tables without any cloths on them to interfere with the grain. I guess color covers the way they serve the steak too, either jacking up the platter on top of everybody's water glass or scooting a dish under one side so that the runny stuff collects in a pool where you can get at it with a spoon.

Not tough deliberating here either, nor are you stressed beyond endurance with something on the order of a menu. Clutter is something neither Christ Cella nor Luger is about to bother you with, so all you've got to do is tell the big bozo standing there what it is you want, which I'm telling you first just to keep the headache out of it. (You can hear your share of Italian sailing on the ethers inside of Christ Cella, whereas it's German at Luger; and if you want my personal advice, you'll

hasten to make sure the waiters in both places are persuaded to form a nice opinion of you right from the start.) Speak up and make it fast and be *decisive* about it, reciting as follows: sliced beef tomatoes and Bermuda onions, a double steak (and that goes for whether you're a population of two or four), French fries (the O'Briens O'Brien can keep), and pecan pie. Trust me, that's *plenty* for your average glutton—because what I haven't told you about is the bread they throw in for free: a sliced rye and a species of roll that could have kept Marie Antoinette in one piece. Beats me where Luger gets these baked beauties, and don't think I'm going to be a hero and ask. Just take my word for it—you could bring the rabble to its knees with what's doing at Luger in the way of bread.

You'll find Peter Luger in Brooklyn, in the Williamsburg district, a precinct that's sort of war-torn but safe enough if you don't get a leg cramp and fall too far behind the rest of the squad.

All right, that's everything I know except telephone numbers and addresses, and those I figure you're inventive enough to turn up for yourself. On the other hand, if you're not smart enough to be a New Yorker, who knows? ●

Gordon Lish is an editor at Knopf.

Fraser Young

Literary Crypt No. 112

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer on page 59.

Q M M T I E G I N I R O
H M K T M P T I E T Q
O L M W J T D M P T -
J O X M R U G
O L T I S M J : G W W M G -
J G I F M T Q L T Q
E J M G O M Q O O M D -
W O G O T R I .

- I T M O B Q F L M