

## FICTION

Vivien's husband's business career is ostensibly merely a rich and powerful man's friendly interest in and furtherance of a younger man's success, but through it he endangers Vivien's marriage and strikes at the very root of her faith and love. That Severidge is finally defeated is the moral victory of good over evil. The judge, stripped of his possessions, still retains his integrity; in the poor lodgings at Margate he finds that he has both time and freedom to finish his book, and when Severidge, in a final effort to conquer, offers him the means to return to his former way of life, the judge rejects it.

Charles Morgan has written a wise and profoundly moving book. The judge's story is not his alone, but in essence all men's, being the story of spiritual values and of the dignity and integrity of the individual. And in this day of so much "hard-boiled," hasty, careless writing, it is good to come upon a polished and beautiful style, ordered without being mannered, with precision and grace and true distinction.

### Costume Piece

*BEFORE THE DELUGE.* By Mark Aldanov. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1947. 561 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by LOUIS FISCHER

**T**HIS book covers the period from January 11, 1874 to March 1, 1881 in European and particularly in Russian history. Prince Otto von Bismarck, the Chancellor of Germany, Czar Alexander the Second and his family, Richard Wagner, Liszt, Karl Marx, Victor Hugo, Dostoevsky, Bakunin, the anarchist leader, Disraeli, and many other leading figures of the time walk through the pages and stop and talk. It is a costume piece. It is history based on meticulous research but served on the golden platter of fiction in a form that gives the novelist considerable freedom.

The central story is the assassination of Alexander the Second by Russian terrorists. Alexander was a rather decent czar as czars went. He was liberal and unconventional. He freed the serfs from feudal bondage and restrained Bismarck from launching another unnecessary war. He consorted openly with a princess while the Empress was alive and married his mistress soon after the Empress died. Court influences sought to dissuade him from modifying the Romanov autocracy but he leaned towards progress and finally signed a manifesto promising some democracy. That day he was killed by a Nihilist bomb.

All these events are narrated in authentic detail yet with a light touch. The only episode in the book which has excitement is an operation on a Russian official performed by a surgeon brought from Vienna for the purpose. The placid atmosphere of easy living and bored loving recreates the old Russia before the Revolution, before the deluge. The uppermost class in and around the Imperial family had no ties with the people and no interest in the country. Its vitamins were gossip, unearned income, mutual entertainment, and mutual detestation.

The history of the period is woven around the lives of several fictional characters, notably a dilettante named Nicholas Mamontov. He never works, he paints a bit, has some affairs, thrills at meeting Bakunin in Switzerland, wants to meet Karl Marx in London, interviews Dostoevsky, plays around at safe distances with some Russian revolutionists, writes for a newspaper, and then suddenly in fullblooded middle-age retires to his estate and marries a circus bareback rider who is practically illiterate and will be his slave. Czarist Russia was full of

Mamontovs who knew that much was wrong with their world but were too lazy, prosperous, and relaxed to do anything.

The Mamontovs were as responsible for the victory of Russian extremism as the czars. The regicides—Aldanov presents exquisite portraits of Sophie Perovsky, Jeliabov, and other early heroes of Russian revolutionary evolution—rebel against the senseless autocratic regime. But these Nihilists were as divorced from the masses as the Romanovs and the Mamontovs. It was thirty-seven years before the triumph of Lenin and Trotsky. The millions had not yet started to stir.

Now and then, as I closed this novel to think about it, I wondered whether we, too, were not living before the deluge. Not that a Bolshevik revolution impends here or elsewhere. No Communist revolution has occurred since 1917. But our world may be moving towards an eclipse while those at the top are blind and those who see split hairs and sip drinks on Connecticut or Vermont estates. That gives the rootless Nihilists of our own time their undeserved opportunity.

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## Your Literary I.Q.

By Howard Collins

### DICKENS CHARACTERS

Eleanor and Leonard Manheim, authors of a new critical study entitled "The Dickens Pattern," offer a quiz with a new type of scoring.

Item A on each question is for the causal Dickens reader; item B is for those who have once read most of the novels years ago; item C is for those who pride themselves on being "up" on Dickens; item D is for the dyed-in-the-wool Dickens fanatic. Count one point for each correct answer on A items, two points for B items, three for C, and four for D. Anyone should be able to get a score of ten; you know some Dickens if you can reach thirty; you're quite an expert if your score is fifty; and you're out of this world—and in the world of Dickens—if you can get over seventy. Answers are on page 35.

1. What Dickens hero worked for (a) an undertaker, (b) a theatrical troupe, (c) a proctor, (d) a retired dustman?
2. What Dickens character ran a school (a) in Yorkshire, (b) in Canterbury, (c) in Brighton, (d) in Cloisterham?
3. What Dickens character earned a living by (a) exhibiting waxworks, (b) being a locksmith, (c) running a horse-riding circus, (d) conducting a dressmaking establishment?
4. What Dickens character played (a) the flute, (b) the organ, (c) the clarinet, (d) the kit?
5. What Dickens character was forced to use (a) a crutch, (b) a claw for a hand, (c) one wooden leg, (d) two wooden legs?
6. What Dickens character died of (a) decapitation, (b) spontaneous combustion, (c) a fall into an abandoned pit, (d) chronic alcoholism?
7. What Dickens character was murdered by (a) a brutal burglar, (b) a French maid, (c) his partner in a fraudulent insurance company, (d) his steward?
8. What Dickens character married (a) a pretended sportsman, (b) a young doctor, (c) a writer of novels, (d) a barrister without clients?
9. What Dickens character who is referred to in the title of the novel in which he plays a part was born in (a) a workhouse, (b) a prison, (c) a fashionable London mansion, (d) a caul?
10. What Dickens character lived (a) in an overturned boat, (b) at Chesney Wold, (c) at the Maypole, (d) at the George and Vulture?

## Crime and Punishment

THE CONDEMNED. By Jo Pagano.  
New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc.  
1947. 215 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by NATHAN L. ROTHMAN

JO PAGANO in this book has a try at the ethical problem of crime and punishment. It is a good try, and that is no condescending phrase but an exact statement of quality. Men like Dostoevsky and Dreiser covered a great many more agonized pages than has Pagano, in their pursuit of the same problem: Who is guilty? Who is the murderer? Where does responsibility lie? And if they did better than he, one reason (among others) may be just that matter of space and extension. Pagano's job is good, intense, sincere; but it is also slick, speedy, tailored. It is thrown together with a lot of skill and whipped into shape right in front of our eyes.

Here is this fellow Wineberg, killed without reason by two crazy, hopped-up, small-time crooks. After a few gas-station hold-ups they have a try at kidnaping a rich young man for ransom. It looks good, until Jerry Slocum decides they have to kill Wineberg because it's safer that way. Jerry is an uncontrollable force; he whips himself into a fury until he hates his victim, and his accomplice too. This is Howard Tyler, who has been led all along the way, a kind of helpless victim of a sloppy childhood, of poverty and no luck and no skill, of the fascination of Jerry, who always knows what to do next. (But Jerry never knew why he did what

he did, never knew about the tumor that pressed upon his brain. They found that later, in an autopsy.) Howard didn't want to kill Wineberg, and he couldn't live with the secret after it happened. He goes visibly out of his mind, and spills to the first girl he can get alone. They are caught, then. And, for an added filip, they are lynched. Who is innocent? Who stands condemned?

Into these two hundred pages Pagano has packed a mass of violence, and a vital gallery of actors. They live, there is no doubting them. The strength of this tale is in its people, their wrenching gestures at living, their cries heard and unheard as they clamor over one another like animals in a pit. And the weakness is Mr. Pagano's passion to orate, the moments when he clammers in, too, and points the trembling finger, utters the prophetic judgments. There are too many pages, such as 171 to 173, when the thing seems frozen for effect, like a room of horror in a wax museum, with Mr. Pagano standing by, lecturing to a gum-chewing audience. There the book loses tone, and the philosophy becomes tawdry. Waiving the philosophy, then, which needed more space, more brooding, more real humble seriousness—the book is a powerful job and will reward reading.

## Glandular Imbalance

COUNTRY PLACE. By Ann Petry.  
Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1947.  
266 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by BRADFORD SMITH

THE READER who chooses this book from its title, expecting a charming country piece, is in for a disappointment. For Ann Petry's second novel (her first was "The Street," written on a Houghton Mifflin literary fellowship) is a tale of lust, avarice, and disillusionment in the kind of New England town where "nothing ever happens."

Johnny Roane, coming home to Lennox (Connecticut) after four years at war, finds his wife Glory cold and unresponsive. Still technically faithful, Glory soon runs to another man's arms. Meanwhile her mother, married again, has been carrying on in similar fashion with—believe it or not—the same man. Mother, however, adds to lechery the sin of avarice; she tries to kill her second husband's mother in order to become mistress of the household.

This should be enough of the story to illustrate the fact that here is no



—Illustrations by Joseph Stefancelli from "The Condemned."

tale for those who have fallen in love with country life. The book seems to say (though not for the first time) that humanity is as degraded in Lennox as in Studs Lonigan's Chicago. The trouble is that, while the reader is made to understand the social forces which produced Studs Lonigan, there is no comparable explanation for Mrs. Petry's characters. Her "good" people—Johnny, his mother, the drug-gist who tells the story—are shadowy, while her "bad" people lack motivation or background. They come to focus through a certain deftness of description—as in the case of the Weasel whose mean tongue and prying eye are responsible for much harm—but the basis of their actions appears to be purely glandular. So when old Mrs. Gramby (incorrectly spelled by the blurb writer) nearly dies because her daughter-in-law has fed her chocolates and hidden the insulin, you feel as if the incident were symbolic of the whole sorry tale: Glory, Ed Barrell, Lil need some unnamed drug to purge them of driving and purposeless lust as Mrs. Gramby controls the sugar in her blood.

Characters thus seen at the mercy of their glands cannot develop or change; maybe that is why their passions seem so listless and why Mrs. Petry felt the need of a hurricane to whip things up. Maybe it is why even the fight between Johnny and his wife's lover, with Glory hovering nearly naked in the background, has a dreamy quality. For a reader cannot feel emotionally engaged in characters for whom no basis of sympathy has been provided. And what is fiction without emotional engagement?

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