

Caliban or Prospero?

THE RED PRUSSIAN. By Leopold Schwarzschild. Hamish Hamilton.

KARL MARX was not an attractive character. Like many great men, in personal relations he was altogether impossible. The apostle of the proletarian revolution, he lived all his life in miserable dependence on the bounty of his bourgeois relatives or of his equally bourgeois disciple, Engels. Fanatically jealous, avid of power and influence, a frustrated poet and intellectual, drunken, lazy, treacherous, slanderous, extravagant, impractical, inconsistent, unoriginal, a man whom it was more dangerous to befriend than to oppose, all these heads of indictment are skillfully drawn against him by a writer who matches the venom of his victim in this derisive biography. This is debunking in excelsis. Karl Marx is thrown out the window like so much dirty water. And yet. . . .

And yet, is the story quite complete? Has the baby perhaps been tossed out with the bathwater? Marx, disorderly and spiteful as he was, had a curious consistency, even a sort of twisted heroism. However crudely and absurdly he formulated them, he sacrificed his life to his theories. True, he demanded that he, and he alone, be given credit for them, and, like Uncle Joe, he dearly loved to purge his former associates—eventually his followers—purged him. But his unhappy life—debts, disease, hounding from one European country to the next, the death of children from lack of proper care and food—was hardly that of a man moved solely by motives of self-interest. Even his marriage becomes a romance. Schwarzschild, setting out to demolish Marx in the same vigorous fashion that Marx himself used to demolish his opponents, has, I feel, rather over-reached himself.

This new biography, itself a translation from German, is based on material mostly not available in English, especially on the correspondence between the two great Marxists published by the Marx Engels Institute in Moscow. Of this publication Schwarzschild appositely remarks: "Apparently the mental and moral schism between Soviet Russia and the rest of the world has grown so deep that the editors were not even conscious that they were doing a poor service to the memory of their hero."

The Red Prussian is a fascinating book. The parts played by Communist, Social-Democrat, or other forward-looking parties in the European upheavals of 1848 and 1870 are graphically described. Schwarzschild writes with spirit, banteringly planting little blows of satire but never pressing for a knock-out, no doubt believing that would spoil the fun. Those honest, those honourable men, Lassalle, Liebknecht, Bakunin, and Engels (for everyone else is a pretty staunch fellow by comparison with the monstrous Karl Marx) are prudently and clearly sketched. The incidental history of early working-class political activity is itself valuable. This is, in fact, an extremely able book which will infuriate the faithful. It may also cause some faint uneasiness to those



KARL MARX

who do not feel it necessary to annihilate the man in order to refute the man's doctrines. Marx's true character is now rather beside the point.

A ROAD TO THE LIGHTHOUSE

THE NOVELS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF. By R. L. Chambers, Oliver and Boyd.

THIS short critical scrutiny of the greatest woman novelist of our time is diligent and carefully weighed. Two chapters—on style and method—are exceptionally good. R. L. Chambers is at his (or her?) best when closest to the object of study. It is when he strays into more generalised considerations of Virginia Woolf and the relation of her work to society at large and its merits compared with that of other writers that the reader becomes uneasy. Could not all that space have been better used making an even closer study of the novels themselves.

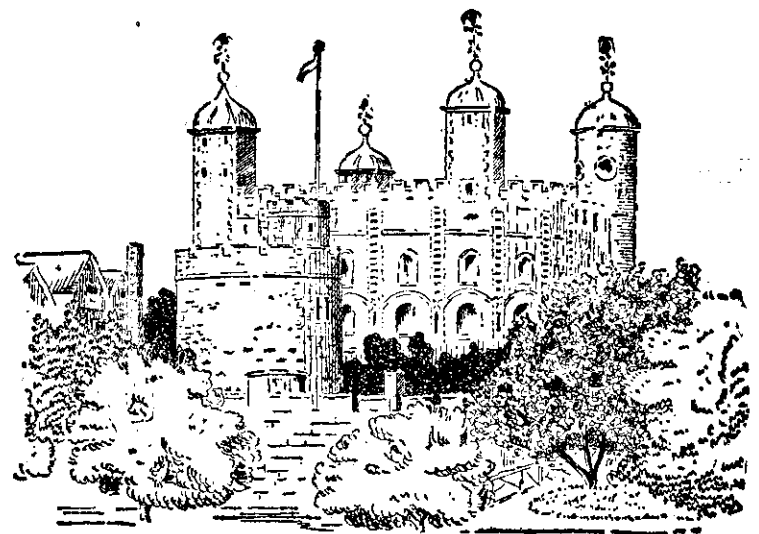
Mr. Chambers bases this book largely on the study of three novels — *Jacob's Room* (Virginia Woolf's first expedition into the stream of consciousness), *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *To the Lighthouse*. He does not greatly value *The Waves* and finds a grave structural fault in *Between the Acts*. I suspect that the standard by which the novels which followed *To the Lighthouse* (the critic's choice as the greatest of Virginia Woolf's writings) are judged is one of simple tidiness rather than their total effect: but a good pattern does not necessarily make a novel good, nor a bad pattern ruin a good novel.

The predominating note in the criticism is caution if not restraint. An occasional aside is happy. I like this one on Joyce's *Ulysses*: "I cannot concede to any user of language the right to destroy language, which is what he seems to me, after due thought, to do." But it was perhaps worth the risk of appearing immoderate and dogmatic to proffer us, instead of the quotations from the rather second-rate authorities he uses as texts, rather more frequently his own opinions. But, even as it is, this book should encourage us to read and re-read the works of a very great novelist.

—David Hall

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