

AS OTHERS SEE US

AMERICA LAUGHS AT HERSELF

JOHAN GARRETT, one of the many light essayists whose work enlivens the *New Statesman and Nation*, discusses as follows America's capacity for self-criticism in the form of laughter:—

Maybe it is all a question of manners. On this side we hesitate—even if the law permitted it—to ascribe to our rulers anything but worthy motives. They may be stupid, but they are well-intentioned. Such a sketch as 'The Hoovers Leave the White House' in the revue *As Thousands Cheer* would be inconceivable here. Mrs. Hoover is represented as removing with her as much as she can carry. The spoons, the radio aerial, even the Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington himself, nothing is sacred from her determination to leave nothing behind 'for those damned Roosevelts.' Her husband remonstrates, but he is brushed aside with 'Well, Herbert, we ought to get *something* out of your being President.' To which he replies: 'Why? No one else did.' And the audience rises to a man.

A comparison of *Punch* with the *New Yorker* is all the difference between mother's milk and vitriol. But America likes the savage satire of Peter Arno, and for wholehearted hatred of all that is cruel, narrow, and intolerant, expressed in terms of paint, a contemporary picture in a Baltimore exhibition, called 'Daughters of Revolution,' is without equal. When Americans criticize they do it with no half-hearted anger. It is the mood of Ben Jonson at his most savage, the mood in which he wrote *The Alchemist*, that astonishingly modern exposure of quackery. England could do to-day with another Jonson to expose the quackeries that beset pseudoanalysis.

In a country where a new craze is born overnight there is need for the laughter that exposes folly. A new cause is Universalism, which claims that the whole world is awaiting the solar system. Its manifesto proclaims that the color of Universalism is white, its flag is white, its shirt—notice this practical touch, for no cause can hope for survival with no shirt to its back—is white, 'white as the light of love.' This latest activity of the charlatan in religion calls for the pen of Mr. Sinclair Lewis for its chastisement. But, the more's the pity, Mr. Lewis seems to be coming to terms with the world that yesterday was his anathema. For fourteen years he has 'rubbed the sore' and withheld 'the plaster.' Now he has abandoned his contemplated novel on trade unionism in the U. S. A., after a year spent in the company of Labor leaders learning the map of the country. Instead he produces *Work of Art*, a novel drained of his ferocity of indignation (and therefore of his merit) and extolling the virtues of a man who gets quietly on with his job. Maybe he has wearied of cauterizing the nation, but the nation is the poorer for his defection. Poorer because America has always been more willing to listen to Mr. Lewis than has England to her own critics. Poorer, too, because in a country where revolutionary changes can occur in the space of a few weeks the ground is more promising for the fruitful work of critic and satirist. George Meredith's words on the comic spirit express at once the need for satiric criticism and the response that America is making to the urgency of need, for the critics are for the most part proving equal to their moment: 'Whenever it sees men self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities; whenever they are at variance with their professions and

violate the unwritten laws binding them in consideration one to another—the spirit overhead will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter.’ But in America what follows is more profitably the poison gas of satire than the innocent laughter of comedy.

JOSEPH ROTH ON AMERICA

JOSEPH ROTH, an exiled German author who is best known in the United States for his novels, *Job* and *Radetzky March*, has completed a new book, *Der Anticrist*, which the Verlag Allert de Lange of Amsterdam has just published. Here is a passage devoted to America:—

I go into the country where the buildings are so high that they scrape the skies. Therefore they are called skyscrapers. The land is huge and wide, but expensive. For that reason the people there do not build one house beside the other but one house over the other, for the air costs nothing there. Since the people are bound to the earth, they are all the more eager to scrape the skies. And it is from this that they draw their pride.

In this country, if a man has a yellow or black skin, he cannot sit in the same room with a man whose skin is white. In this country there are thousands of churches. But in these churches money is collected with the aid of piety. The people carry the name of God on their lips as one speaks of a rich and distinguished uncle, who adds to one's prestige if one mentions that one is his nephew. Many men in this country are not the children but the nephews of God; the heirs of God. The poor pray to Him for money, and the rich pray to Him for more money. And often God acts in this country as if He were a rich uncle. He gives money to many poor people, and to many of the rich He gives still more money. He multiplies the factory chimneys and the

alms of the beggar, and He often hardens the hearts of the strong, and He often breaks the hearts of the weak, and He gives to them that have and takes away from them that have not.

His laws are strange in this country. The value of a man is based on his power. Liberty stands as a statue at the country's gates; she has been exiled. And she has turned to stone. I also visited Hollywood, or *Hölle-Wut* (Hell-Rage), the place where Hell rages, that is to say, where men are the shades of their own shadows. That is the origin of all the shadows in the world, the Hades that sells its shadows for money, the shadows of the living and of the dead, to all the screens throughout the world. There the possessors of usable shadows gather together and sell them for money and are spoken of in worshipful and holy fashion, each in accordance with the importance of his shadow. There it comes to pass that one meets men and women in the street, living people, who are not even the shades of their own shadows, like the actors in the cinema, but are even less than that—the shades of the shadows of others.

It is also a Hades that not only dispatches its shadows *to* the screen but also dispatches *from* the screen the living people whose shadows can no longer be sold. It makes shades of its shadows. That is Hollywood. Hell rages. There is a tumult composed of the men who finance the shadow-players, the shadow-dealers, the shadow-brokers, who are called directors, the shadow-conspirators, and the shadow-lenders. And there are many who sell their own voices to the shadow of another, who speaks another language. And I saw there, in the factories, what the shadows sell, in big rooms where twenty people were sitting, each with a separate telephone. And every two or three minutes a couple of the telephones would ring, and the men would take them up and say, ‘Nothing.’ And that means that there is no work.

All day long people call up the shadow

factory trying to sell their shadows. And there are so many people offering their shadows that the factory has installed twenty no-sayers. And every three minutes they say, 'Nothing,' all day long, because so many people in the country want to sell their shadows. And these are not the possessors of ordinary shadows like you or me but the possessors of extraordinary shadows. One is a giant, another a hump-back, the third a dwarf, the fourth has the face of a horse or a donkey, the fifth can climb like an ape, the sixth dances on stilts, the seventh on a tight-rope, and so on. Others are the doubles of famous men who appear from time to time in historical productions, and others are the doubles of two or three different famous people. They are not only the shades of their own shadows but of other shadows more remarkable than their own.

FELIX AGAINST THE U. S. A.

UNDER the title *Felix kontra U. S. A.*, a new German novelist, Hansjürgen Weidlich, has written a book that does for the 'little man' in the United States what Hans Fallada did for the *kleiner Mann* of Germany. It is published by the Buchverlag der Buch- und Tiefdruck-Gesellschaft of Berlin and is reviewed as follows by Emanuel Häussler in the *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*:—

A young German who spent a year in the United States by himself and then had to struggle against everyday difficulties with his young wife has written what is perhaps the first book depicting the life, cares, labors, and disappointments of the little man in the States, seen through the eyes of a German immigrant and described with the pen of an uncommonly gifted writer. This Hansjürgen Weidlich, a new man who used to be a day laborer and went through the hard school of Pittsburgh and New York, has notably

enriched the literature of the 'land of unlimited opportunity.' Anyone who has been able to gain nothing more than a brief glimpse of the New World will find that this book, with its collection of stories and horrors, clarifies many things that the hurried visitor lacks time to assimilate, and to those who have never crossed the Atlantic it reveals aspects of a cultural community seven thousand kilometres distant from Europe but actually as remote as the stars.

So long as 'prosperity' gave life a fantastic drive, it did not make much difference that pensions, old-age insurance, unemployment relief, and health insurance were unknown in America. Nobody cared if the elevator operator had to report every morning at eight o'clock and earned fifteen dollars a week from the same boss who paid Stone and Cavanaugh on the sixty-eighth floor of the Chrysler Building one hundred and fifty dollars a week, for they might suddenly discover some Saturday afternoon that they would not be needed the next Monday morning. Business was booming, and it was always easy to pick up a job somewhere else. Presently, however, the ill effects of the World War made themselves felt, and the depression set in.

At this moment a young German, hoping for all kinds of miracles, appeared at the B. and K. plant in Pittsburgh with a letter of recommendation in his pocket and finally got a job as shipping clerk in one of their warehouses. He did not feel discouraged, for all the stories about America begin with the little shoe-shine boy who becomes a newspaper Cræsus or with the bank messenger who becomes the dictator of Wall Street. One merely had to work a lot harder over there, much harder than was good for one. This meant reporting punctually to the boss, and anyone who was a minute late lost an hour's pay; and, if it happened twice because there was no more room in the subway, one had to find a new job.

One day the head of the personnel department summoned the young German shipping clerk and asked him to take over the checking department. Overnight his salary was raised to forty-five dollars a week, and he was put in charge of nine office girls. 'The first one entered the incoming bills by machine, the second checked them by machine, the third entered them in a book by machine, the fourth entered them under departmental accounts by machine, the fifth sorted them out in chronological order, the sixth sorted them out under the different banks on which they were drawn, the seventh wrote checks by machine, the eighth made out the total expenditures by machine, the ninth helped the head of the department balance accounts, typed his letters, and kept the departmental records.'

One day the young immigrant, who had now become confident of himself, announced that he did not think that Pittsburgh and New York were America and decided that it would be nice to accompany a native American who owned a Ford on a trip across the continent to California, taking with them beds, a tent, an alcohol stove, cooking equipment, and all the requisites of a camping expedition. After a ten weeks' voyage of exploration across deserts and fertile countrysides, through uniform cities and fantastically beautiful natural scenery, there would surely be work again. Where else would there be work if not in the U. S. A.? And it is easier to look for a job if you know you have six hundred dollars in the bank.

But America suddenly had no more work to offer, and the German had no money because his bank had failed. Shipping clerks earned half as much money as they used to, and there were a hundred applicants for every job. Looking for work in New York is a bad business. The agencies were overcrowded, the help-wanted columns in the big newspapers shrank from day to day, and the wages being offered were not enough

to pay rent for a single room. Even the search for work went forward at an American tempo: out of bed in the gray of the morning, elevated, subway, by elevator to the fortieth floor, an interview with the personnel chief in the second, third, or tenth firm visited in the course of the day, offers of jobs as magazine salesman, office boy, agent, outside man for crooked sales of stocks and mortgages. Then there were written applications for positions as schoolteacher, bookstore clerk, correspondent, elevator man, and dishwasher.

Finally, he lands something, and the young husband no longer has to depend on his young wife. She has been working as a stenographer in German, English, and French; but suddenly trade with Europe declines, and they yearn for home. Chance offers a second and then a third job; the man has to pound the pavements again. Again he makes the rounds of the agencies and reads over their doors the supreme commandment of the American business Bible—'Smile a little, it won't hurt.'

The book raises many serious problems, but the author always remains a clever, bright-eyed, amusing master of description. From a thousand tiny details he reconstructs the everyday life of the little fellows in the U. S. A. The narrow offices, as impersonal as prison cells but equipped with every modern technical device, the awful suburban apartments with their skeleton fire escapes, the eternal menu of canned foods at home, the bewildered emotions of the little immigrant in this 'land without a soul,' the daily struggle for a bit of bread, the physical numbness of a life of penal servitude, the speculative smiles of the superbly painted girls who earn fifteen dollars a week selling soap in Woolworth's and who appear in the Roxy district in the evening dressed like ladies. The author draws upon all these elements to create a brilliant picture of life that has destroyed our foreign illusions about America.

THE GUIDE POST

(Continued)

ton is playing in the national policies of Russia, Japan, England, and the United States. In spite of a certain weakness for melodramatic effects, he possesses the supreme virtue of being able to indicate the connections between world economics and world politics.

EDMOND JALOUX, one of the most polished essayists in France, is not so blind to recent events in his country that he does not perceive that tremendous changes are on the way. He maintains that Anatole France personified the Third Republic and prophesies that a new type of man will soon come into existence to personify the new régime that is also in the making. But what form either the man or the régime may take he does not say.

TO JUDGE from the collection of Fascist utterances compiled from the reactionary press, this new French régime will bear a close resemblance to Hitler's. To-day, the French public is being treated to the identical diatribes against Jews, bankers, and democracy that accompanied the rise of Hitler in Germany. Most of the 'best minds' in both countries took the other side, and it remains to be seen whether the united front of Socialists and Communists that finally came into existence in France will succeed where the divided activities of the two parties in Germany failed.

Z. GOLDSTEIN'S story of an Hungarian revolutionist is translated from the French, but it bears no specifically national character. Here is a collection of pure 'type characters,' in a story the scene of which might be laid in Minneapolis, Buenos Aires, or Madrid.

WE BRING the old year to a close with an announcement of the greatest interest to the new. Beginning in January, Mr.

Robert Littell, novelist, dramatic critic, and essayist will join our staff and contribute a leading signed essay to our 'Letters and the Arts' department every month. We have long felt the necessity of adding to the literary contents of the magazine, and we can think of no better way of doing it than to enlist the aid of a professional man of letters who is also an accomplished linguist in French and Russian. In August, 1896, Mr. Littell's grandfather and namesake surrendered control of THE LIVING AGE, which Eliakim Littell founded in 1844. After an interval of thirty-nine years a member of the same family that established the magazine returns to the ancestral fold.

IN RESPONSE to requests of our subscribers we have scoured the German press for more first-hand material from the land of Hitler. Most of our findings this month are confined to the 'Books Abroad' department and include a review of Hans Fallada's new novel,—his second in six months,—Friedrich Sieburg's opinion of a collection of essays entitled *Germany Seen from Abroad*, and a partially sympathetic notice of Werner Sombart's latest tome, *German Socialism*. Perhaps these three items may give some clue as to why the German press has lost about 90 per cent of its interest since the Third Reich began its thousand-year reign.

IN THE 'Persons and Personages' department we make the acquaintance of the last of the *genro*, or Elder Statesmen, of Japan. Even in his eighties Prince Saionji's advice carries more weight than that of almost any other man in the country.

OUR editorial article on Senator Nye's investigation of the munitions industry explains itself. Credit should be given, however, to Mr. Ernest Angell, a New York attorney, who is now preparing a longer study on the subject, for the suggestion of a presidential commission.