

St. Louis Artists Win

ORRICK JOHNS

THE old court house of St. Louis has gathered the grime of Illinois bloody bituminous, and soaked up the poisonous acids of St. Louis air for nearly a century. Negro slaves were sold at auction on its broad stairs. Its flaky old colored stones have been spattered with the life-stream of Civil War heroes, street-car strikers, suicides, cyclone victims and oldtime ready-gun fighters.

Four or five years ago the lawyers and judges abandoned it for a fine new skyscraper. By a freak of fate artists took their places, and its big corridors and domed rotunda were filled with all the unsold canvases in St. Louis studios. Probably there never was such a large collection of bad art indiscriminately thrown together in one building. Decayed culture took the place of decayed justice.

The entire space, some eighteen or twenty huge rooms, was arrogantly hogged by the St. Louis Art League, under an agreement of free rent, light and heat in return for "upkeep." The Art League consists actually of one moss-grown ex-museum-curator, who once tipped his hat to Whistler, and has become the tool of a younger, slicker group of art racketeers. Various shady activities go on, an annual rowdy ball run for profit, and a languid art class.

The John Reed Club became cognizant of this situation and at a meeting some months ago, a committee was appointed to demand space. At the time, Joe Jones had just returned from Provincetown, bent on a final decisive swing toward revolutionary art. Jones, in his twenties, is easily the most important artist in St. Louis, and his work has had national notice. He comes from a working class background and himself has been a house-painter.

Jones agreed to teach a class of unemployed art students, without fee, giving criticism on two nights weekly. His conditions were that the class should have a room under lock and key, free of all dictation, that students of every color and race should be admitted, and that all facilities, models, materials, etc., should be available on equal terms without charge.

The first appearance of the committee was greeted with the cry of "reds," and a campaign of villification (that still goes on after the fight has been won). It is useless to bore experienced readers with all the dodges, delays, lies, alibis and other evasions put up by the racketeers, who saw with alarm that some people of determination and vigorous ideas were attempting not only to take their space but to overshadow them in importance. Many signatures were obtained to a petition, and two or three liberals helped actively, but the real decisive factor was the obvious serious-

ness and solidarity of the class itself. One of the best rooms in the building was obtained, large and light—and without strings to it.

The first class that gathered numbered about twenty, but the average for the first month was higher than that, and on one night there were as many as fifty, without accommodations for them all. About one half are Negroes, and among these are some of the best talents. A considerable group of students, men and women, has deserted from the fashionable Washington University art school to study with Jones. Jones' policy is to give them all hard work, a sound preliminary practice in form, and let the real workers emerge from the mass of dilettantes and those who copy photographs of Mr. and Mrs. Roosevelt, or want to jump at once into nude drawing.

The growth of the class has required giving critical direction on four nights instead of two, and the room is kept open all day from ten in the morning to eleven at night, for the half dozen who are always at work.

At one end of the room is a wall, 37 by 16 feet, broken only by a small door. The idea came early to Jones to do a collective mural on this wall. He prepared the cartoon, a scene on the Mississippi levee, dominated on one side by a span of Eads bridge and on the other by a big steamboat; and built up with a dozen scenes of levee workers, bonus machers, unemployed, and typical river-front groups. One, for example, is a Negro baptism which merges into a demonstration of the victorious Nut-picker strikes last year, in

which several members of the John Reed Club took an active part.

The liberal group got together a fund of nearly \$100 for material, the wall was lined with beaverboard and the work begun. A certain number of students had already shown their aptitude for revolutionary drawings, making spontaneous panels of working class subjects. Jessie Housley, a talented Negro girl, is working on figures for the baptism, Celia Schwartz, member of the John Reed Club, is doing the detail of the Nut-pickers' demonstration. Others working directly on the mural are Foster and Fred Alston, both Negroes. Alston is a high school teacher. Jones allows wide initiative before his own finishing, and the result is real originality.

Jones himself is indefatigable and full of resources. He has outwitted the opposition in spite of a filthy campaign of white chauvinism and "moral" calumny. He is a rare combination of politician and hard-hitter, of uncompromising leadership and sympathetic teaching.

The Unemployed Art Class is solidly entrenched in the old court house, and more space will be obtained for cultural revolutionary activities. The reaction of the observer to the class at work is powerful. The feeling on entering the old room—where the judge's bench still stands elevated above the floor between the tall windows—would sound exaggerated if you tried to describe it. It is as if in this abandoned fortress of the old order, of the farce of capitalist justice, a new revolutionary life had already taken hold and was flourishing. If an attempt is made to dislodge it now the ensuing struggle will have resounding effects. One big result of the movement will be the Jones collective mural itself.



"HE WANTS TO BE A DETECTIVE!"

Kabat

Voices from Germany

ON Saturday Albert took a three-day leave from duty at the concentration camp. He arrived home in the early afternoon.

His father opened the door. They looked at each other in surprise. Neither said a word. Albert had expected his mother to be at the door. His father said: "Come on in."

He thrust the door of the room open and walked heavily to the table. Albert followed him. They sat down. Albert felt strangely excited. It wasn't until later that he realized that this feeling had been a desire for friendship. Again they looked searchingly into each other's face. Each found that the other had changed a great deal. First of all, his hands, thought Albert, are more wrinkled and gnarled. His face doesn't shine as it used to. His hair is thinner. He's getting old. Albert also noticed with surprise that the picture above the bed had been removed. So, father did take old Marx off the wall. Still, there was no chance that father had changed his mind. The picture wasn't there, but in its place there appeared a sharp-edged, light rectangle that made the pink roses of the wall-paper stand out brightly.

"Just came to see you folks," said Albert, shakily. "I'm on leave. How're things?"

"We're managing. Maybe it'll get worse. It hasn't been so hot, you know. I got fired. I got fired, and the papers say that unemployment is decreasing. Lotta nerve, ain't it?"

Albert was shocked. Father out of work—must be hard on mother.

"They fired you, 'cause they got suspicious of you. That's why. You must have done something," replied Albert. He was astonished at himself. How aggressive he was!

"Now listen! Nobody there knew a thing about me. Even your pals in the Nazi units started a fuss about the firing, a bigger fuss than anybody ever made before. But right after that, some party functionaries came and they scolded the workers even worse than our old party bosses used to do. These, my boy, are the important issues you should think about. That would set your head right, and quick too!"

The old man filled his pipe with some dark tobacco and started to smoke. Albert opened the collar of his shirt. His hands seemed to look browner. He liked those brown hands. A cloud of smoke passed by his head and dissolved in the window. It was a familiar smell to him. Father still smoked the same cheap biting tobacco as in the old days.

Albert made up his mind to have a decent talk with his father. At first he was silent. The old man started: "Lots of things have happened since you were here last. There was plenty of fireworks, and lots of nice speeches. But that's about all in politics. I'm

sure you like it, because you don't see what's actually going on. You are satisfied. Everything seems okay to you."

Albert leaned back. The talk didn't interest him.

"And what do you think, they've killed your friend, little red Otto?" asked his father.

Albert looked up, terribly shocked. He was so stunned that even later he didn't know how he had felt in that moment. The expression on his father's face was solemn. It left no doubt; they have killed Otto.

Albert raised his hand slowly, laid it on the table, and began to press the wood with all the strength of his fingers. He swallowed a few times. He pictured Otto's smile and imagined he heard his low always mournful voice. He had expected to talk to Otto the next day. He had been enjoying the thought of sitting with him somewhere or strolling with him through the streets. That was over now. They have killed Otto.

"Who did it, for heaven's sake?"

The old man was startled. He held the cold pipe in his hands. He hadn't expected Albert to be so shocked. He pulled his chair nearer to his son and said hastily:

"Your people, feller!"

He searched Albert's face while he continued:

"Quite a simple matter. If you are not going to be stubborn about it, you too will find it simple. Today, my boy, there is nothing left for us, but to keep all that dirty work on our minds, for later on. The bill gets bigger. And I hope that at the time this bill will be ready you'll have gotten rid of your damned, lousy, brown rags. You must come to your senses, after all! I too had to learn, until I realized that the system under Weimar was just as capitalistic as under the Kaiser or under Hitler. And you'll see, if you haven't realized it yet, that nothing has nor will be changed under Hitler. Tell me, is it different now, is it? Look here, I'm not so young any more, but if the day comes—and it will come as sure as I'm sitting here—and somebody will say: Here, your son is on the other side of the barricade!—then I shall not hesitate to pull the trigger, all the same. I want to be honest and tell you that. I always blame myself that I'm partly responsible for your damned way of thinking!"

The old man sat still and breathed heavily. He slowly filled his pipe again and lit it with great fuss.

"You see, Otto knew too much," he said. "The case was being investigated by some reliable people; not Nazi state attorneys, of course, but by good and honest proletarians. You haven't got the slightest notion how strong the Commune really is. The devil knows why Otto got himself mixed up with the investigation of that murder. And, first of all, how he found out about it. He cer-

tainly was one who had joined the Nazi ranks with the wrong ideas. My God, he was so young, and politically he was a baby. Aw, it's all the same. Anyway, they found his corpse, sewn in a sack, near the mouth of the Teltow Canal. Sewn in a sack, his face trampled on, and with a nice clean bullet hole in his back!"

The old man had finished, and Albert was thinking what a corpse would look like when the sack is opened. He never had believed that his people had sewn any of his party friends into a burlap bag and thrown it into the Elbe River near Dresden. Still, he didn't doubt that they killed Otto in that manner. So, he wouldn't see Otto tomorrow, and he had been looking forward to their talk so much.

He took a cigarette and reached for matches. His father gave him some. Albert inhaled deeply and blew the smoke slowly into the air. Then he said calmly: "Why do we talk at all? There is no sense to it! You'll never be able to convince me. Sure, lots of things today are being done in a wrong way. But that will change soon."

His own words struck him as ridiculous while he was talking. He got up hesitantly. The old man looked with half-closed eyes at him through a cloud of blue smoke. Before Albert left, he said thoughtfully:

"You're too good for that gang, much too good. If they didn't have you boys—what could they do without you? Damn it, why don't you realize where you belong!"

Out in the kitchen, Albert met his mother. Her hair was not fixed and her face looked worn and empty. Her eyes did not get any warmer after she had scrutinized his face long and silently. Albert wondered why she was not at all glad to see him.

"So, you are here again," she said finally. "It doesn't seem to be much fun to watch those poor devils in your camp all the time, eh?"

He kissed her. She remained cold. Father influences her, he thought. Then he decided not to stay longer, he didn't want to talk to his mother any more. At the door he waited for a few seconds to see whether she would call him back. But today—unlike the other times—she didn't ask him to stay. As he didn't know where else he could sleep, he said roughly:

"Fix me a bed, I'm coming home tonight."

On the stairway he gave way to a despair which he couldn't overcome. A despair he had never experienced before.

—Translated by Andor Braun.

From a novel "Shot While Attempting to Escape," by W. Schönstedt. Published by Editions due Carrefour, Paris, 1934.

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