

Pelzer

"Just Another of Those Damned Strike Towns"

FIELDING BURKE

GOD is in Pelzer. He is on the tongue of every third person you meet there. "God won't stand fer this," a man will tell you. "As shore as there's a God in Heaven, we're goin' to pull out of this mess," says another.

"Yeah," jeers a skeptic. "We'll be with the sheep, I reckon, when we're divided on the day of Judgment, but I wish the goats would let us have something to eat right now. I'm hungry."

Many people in Pelzer are hungry. The last human that I spoke to when I was on my way to take the 'bus out of town was visibly perishing for food. She was a tiny girl, trim as a pixy. As I passed a forlorn house she came down the steps, repressing her sobs. She seemed to be about four years old until her wet eyes looked up at me. Under her match-stick of an arm was a school tablet, so she must have been six. As she left the house her father in the door urged her forward very harshly. But his blustering voice had love and desperation in it. She came on, pushed by that voice and I let her overtake me while I busied myself getting a nickel out of my purse. (I had overstayed my time in Pelzer and was looking for nickels, not quarters.) When she had the nickel she held it up unbelievably between thumb and finger, then ran back toward the house, holding it high. "May I keep it, daddy?"

She was resigned to giving it away. Her

contribution to family support. So early are the children made a part of the supreme effort to get bread. But "daddy" nodded his head and she ran back to me, accepting me as a part of God's world and ready to tell me what she had been crying about. "I didn't have anything to take to school. There wasn't anything left from breakfast. Daddy didn't eat any breakfast. He was feelin' bad."

There was more than one house in Pelzer that morning where daddy had eaten no breakfast. A determined effort to break down the workers' union (a local branch of the U.T.W.A.) is now organized in Pelzer and functioning with both subtle and open force. A year ago the union was strong, taking uncompromising part in the general strike that threw such a scare into the breasts of the mill-owners. God, they nearly won! With the "settlement" of the strike, mill companies became busy strengthening company unions and organizing new ones. The workers had to be persuaded or coerced away from their big national union. In the Pelzer mills there were a few men ready to obey the company. A "Good Will Association" was organized with about twenty members. Non-union workers were easily corralled into it. "Stand by the company and it will stand by you," they were told. As the "Good Willers" increased in numbers the company became more aggressive. Whenever a man was fired he was invariably a member of the U.T.W.A. One by one excellent workers were dropped

for no reason whatever until over fifty union members had been discharged.

When the strike came you could read in all the newspapers that the union struck because one man, Roscoe Smith, had been fired. That is not the story. Paul Ross, president of the local branch, had gone to Blackmon, manager of the four Pelzer mills and asked a hearing for the fifty discharged men.

"Are you running these mills, or am I?" Blackmon threw at him.

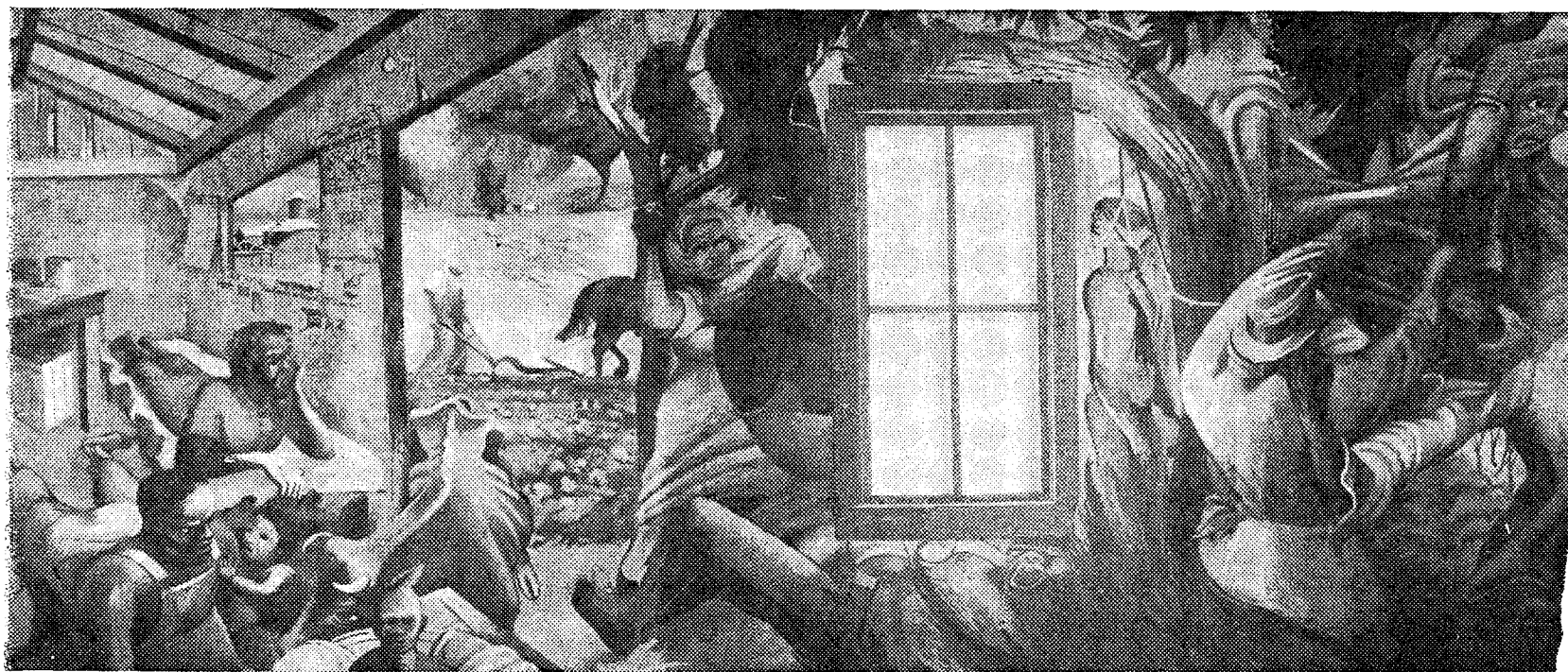
"If I didn't think you were running them I wouldn't come to you," said Ross, a mild, slim fellow with big, peaceable blue eyes and a most dependable backbone. "I ask you in the name of the United Textile Workers of America to reconsider these cases."

"Who yer talkin' about? I don't know those people. Don't know anything about 'em?"

"Well, Mr. Blackmon, I'll tell you how you can find out. Just fire another union man."

In a few days Roscoe Smith was fired and the strike was called that night. Blackmon went at midnight to the leading grocer, whose store was mill property (the company owns Pelzer in toto) and told him to put all sales on a cash basis or move out. No credit foolishness! Old Man Hunger would take care of this strike!

But funds came in. Didn't they have national backing? A great union was behind them. They could live.



THE STRUGGLE

Strike-breakers were imported. Some of them the usual thugs. Many of them poverty-ridden families from Georgia and Alabama. Workers against workers. Driven into line against one another by the whip of hunger held in the hands of those who own.

The Governor sent in the National Guards to "protect life and property" and under their guns the mills continued to operate. The company refused to make the slightest concession and the Guards could not remain indefinitely. Taxpayers were howling. Very well. The management felt that it was not prepared to handle the situation. They were ready to "let the striking devils have it."

ON Saturday the troops were withdrawn. On Sunday night men with guns were smuggled into one of the mills and several times through the night there was firing through the windows at the unarmed strikers out in front. Cole, the young constable in the employ of the management, was found in the neighborhood of the mill. Winkler, leader of the men on picket—"little Winkie," they loved to call him—went to Cole. "For God's sake, get those murderers out of the mill before they kill some of us!" Cole hesitated. "You can go in," said Winkler. "They won't fire on you and you *know* it!" What "Winkie" wanted most of all was to get guns and fight back. But he knew that would be suicide for all his men, the final death of their union. They had to stand unarmed and be shot at, or run. And they were not going to run. Not yet.

The company was still making gestures toward "law and order" and Cole said he would phone to Anderson for the sheriff. When he came from the phone he reported that the sheriff was on his way to Pelzer. But he didn't arrive until nine o'clock Monday when everything was quiet except for groups knotted in talk over the tragedies of the night and morning. "Seven hours for the

sheriff to drive twenty miles!" shouted Winkie. "He was rarin' to get here, wasn't he, boys?"

Gertrude Kelley was dead and seventeen men were wounded. Around six a. m. fire had been poured into the picket-line not only from the mill windows, but from the left of the line and from the hill street above it. A voice had been heard from the hill, "Let's go get 'em, boys." A man had appeared at a mill window, holding up his hands as if in signal, a shot rang from the hill in answer and scores of shots followed, from the mill, from the group stationed at the left and from the hillside. There was one line of escape for those on the picket-line—into the railroad cut at the right, with its high cement walls. All made a dash for the cut. The most inhuman moment of those inhuman hours arrived. Firing was concentrated on each end of the cut. Gertrude Kelley stopped at the entrance to the cut and leaned against the cement wall. Perhaps she was overcome with fright, or exhausted with the rapid dash. A bullet struck her in the throat, curved down through her lungs and stopped against her ribs. She took a step forward, fell to her knees, rose, with her hand slung blood from her throat, took another step and fell dying. Twenty-three years old and the mother of two little girls, Barbara Jean and Sybil Virginia.

"I don't know how I'll get along without Gertie," a young woman said to me. "She could think of so many things to say that made you feel good. No matter how hard the day was she always came in with a joke to pass around. I never saw anybody with more life than she had. She was a good mother too, and her home was always as neat as Sunday. I don't know how she found time for it. I have to sling things about and run to work, but Gertie could keep up her home and work too."

"Was she nice-looking?"

"She was the prettiest thing in the mills. Her head covered with dark brown curls and no 'perm' either."

George Washington Henson, sixty-five years old, was arrested for the murder of Gertrude. He told me about it as I sat talking to him and his wife on their little front porch.

"I've known Gertie since she was knee-high to a duck," he said, "and she's always played around with my little girl. I'd as soon turned a gun on myself as at Gertie. Through the Sunday night I heard shootin' at the mill, but my wife wouldn't let me go down. Soon as it was grey day I got my old shot-gun that hadn't been fired since I shot at a duck on the river last February and set out for the picket-line. When I got there they said I was welcome, but the gun couldn't come on the line. I was an' old feller and Winkler told me I'd better keep out o' the way of the firin'. So I went up and sat behind the bandhall till it was all over. I laid my gun down at my feet and never fired it at all. When the shootin' stopped I picked it up and carried it home. Everybody could see it. I thought I had a right to carry my gun and I would have used it, I reckon, if Winkler hadn't told me they had to picket peaceable. Lord, I wouldn't stand there an' all them guns pintin' at me."

As Henson was the only union man that had been seen with a gun he was promptly arrested. But the bullet was taken from Gertrude's body and it proved to be from a forty-five calibre pistol. The murder charge against Henson had to be dropped. He was then indicted, with eighteen others, for rioting and violence and kept in jail a week before bond could be arranged. Only the strikers were jailed. Not a man who had shot at them was arrested. At the inquest of Gertrude Kelley I heard many witnesses identify men whom they had seen shooting toward the strikers—among them the con-



stable, Cole—but as no one could swear to the actual bullet that had struck her the jury gave their verdict “death by person unknown.” Not a man who had been seen in the act of shooting was indicted, but the arrest of the strikers continued. Up to the day of my leaving Pelzer, sixty-three union men had been arrested and some were still in jail, with Paul Ross making desperate efforts to secure bond. Their arrest worked to the advantage of the mill company in two ways. It kept the union funds in such a state of depletion that nothing was left with which to feed the strikers. Then when the Governor, after the tragedy, had called a conference on the situation, the manager of the mills had been made to sign an agreement for the company forcing recognition of the union and the re-employment of all strikers who had not been guilty of violence. They were not to be re-employed at once, but gradually and all were to be at work by January 1. Before that date many will have been proved “guilty of violence,” unless help comes from some source not now apparent.

Ella Thomas, head of the relief committee said, “If I go into another house where there isn’t a scrap to eat and I’ve nothing to give them I’ll go crazy. I run to the Post Office every time a mail comes in and there isn’t a thing. There’s a bakery in Greenville that will give us bread if we go after it and I can’t get money for the gasoline.”

When a dollar was dropped into her lap it wasn’t a minute until she had drawn on her stockings and shoes and was rushing for a car.

HOW are they to be fed until January 1? Some were walking out into the country to pick cotton. They could make fifty cents a day, they told me, and walk there and back, if it wasn’t “terrible far.” The greatest concern, of course, was for the children. It is agony over the children that causes surrender. The “Good Will Association” knows how to turn that screw. When the trouble in Pelzer began there was a general scattering of children among relatives, so far as there were relatives who could possibly receive and feed them. Paul Ross took two of his four up to his mother in Spartanburg.

The federal-relief truck passes through the country once a week and strikers are not debarred from its benefits. The Hensons asked me to share their home, which I did and I was there the day that Mrs. Henson walked two miles to secure her “relief” from the truck. She came back with two small cans of chopped meat (which you could eat, she said, if you had a few onions to cut up with it and give it a “taste”), less than a half-gallon measure of sweet potatoes and a pound of butter. There was never enough butter on the truck to go around and she was lucky to get any that day. This food was one week’s “relief” for two adults.

What troubled Henson most was not hunger but the fear that the “union” would

break down. “We were strong last year and won that big strike. Anyhow they said we won it. The company had to promise to let us have our union and then they set to work to break it up ever’ way they could think of. Looks like they’ve about done it, with so many of us havin’ to scatter away from here or set down an’ starve. There’s something wrong shorely when a man works like a mule all his life, never havin’ any pleasure-money at all and then comes to the end of his days with nothin’ but charity to keep him alive.”

He was a fine-looking old man, the very clean, clear-skinned kind, with youthful brown eyes indicating that he could even now enjoy a little “pleasure-money” if he had it.

From the little back porch of the Henson house one could look on a scene of great beauty. In a choice for a foundation no town could be more blessed. The Saluda River winds there, among hills that have fragments of green valleys creeping about them and up their sides. The water-oaks are gigantic, as they should be to hold up such luxuriant foliage. The mills themselves are not disfiguring. They are built of russet-red brick, a color full of both age and life and there is dignity in their symmetrical towers, a great cleanliness in their shining windows. Below them is the winding river, back of them the rolling hills and above them a tender sky with slow, restful clouds. Security and happiness! Work and joy! Incredible that men could crouch behind those gleaming windows to shoot out on their unarmed fellow-men.

THE houses of the mill-workers are not set in stiff rows, but are dropped along winding roads and tucked into spaces of varied shapes—triangular, circular or geometrically undefinable—imposed by the hilly ground.

Any householder will recognize the air of resistance, humanity pitted against dirt, which hangs about the dwellings. There are many little gardens, patches here and there shaped like the palm of your hand and sometimes not much bigger. There are flowers before the doors and in innumerable buckets on the porches. I stopped so long before the loveliness of one yard that its owner came out to join me. She was grey-haired and unbelievably thin, but her little boy about her skirts was evidence against age. In the yard were long rows of periwinkle, the tall, white kind with the carmine heart and there was a spreading lantana, the largest I ever saw, with hundreds of its outheld many-colored clusters. She said it would grow from cuttings and I begged a sprig to try out in my mountain garden. A pale flush of pride came to her chalk-white face as she gave it to me. It was a beautiful garden and no hands but her own had tended it. The women behind all of the flowers were so devastatingly human. And so hungry. How good it would be to hear them cry out: “To hell with patience! We will march these streets and

not plant a flower until our withered children are given a chance to grow.”

On the mind of the founder of Pelzer was checked and figured the feudal pattern of a “gentleman.” In the eighteen and eighties he had sought controlling stock in the mills of Piedmont, a town several miles away. Unable to obtain it, he set out down the river to find rock shoals where a dam could be built and plucked a spot from the forest for founding his mills and his town. He built houses and filled them with workers—his workers. He gave them churches, where they learned to bow to God’s will—his will. He gave them schools, where they were taught their place in a feudal kingdom—his kingdom. And the impress of it all still lingers. An old woman told me how she had begun to work for him when only a girl and made twenty cents a day. With pride she insisted that he was a “good, fair man. If we had him back we wouldn’t be havin’ this trouble.”

But they are learning. A bare cupboard speaks without equivocation. Bullets whizzing around you tell you something you don’t forget. I thought of Paul Ross testifying at the inquest.

Coroner: Did you see where the shooting came from?

Ross: No. Paul Holcombe fell at my feet and I was busy trying to get him out.

Coroner: (Very loudly) Then you don’t know from what direction the shooting came?

Ross: Seemed to me that it was coming from every direction. But I didn’t have time to look about. That man was badly hurt and I didn’t want another bullet to hit him. Bullets were flying pretty thick in that spot and I had to get him out. That was all I could think about. We were coming out of the railroad cut and the firing was hot there.

I thought of Holcombe, the wounded man, whom I had visited the day before. He had a bullet hole in the abdomen and another in his thigh. The “union” had supplied a doctor, but there was no food in the house. There were two little children, very nice and quiet and the young wife with patient eyes was going to walk to the “relief” truck for two little tins of tasteless hamburger and a handful of sweet potatoes. And she would get some bread when Ella Thomas returned from Greenville. They were all quietly happy because the doctor had told them that day that daddy might get well and they could let him sit up in bed for half an hour.

And I remembered “little Winkie” making a speech. He wrung his hands, looking as if he might burst with rebellion. There were tears of anger on his cheeks, as he told how his unarmed men had been shot down around him. “But I’ll never stand there like that again. If we have to call another strike—and it looks like it—we’ll scour the country for guns and we’ll die fighting!”

They are learning. And when they know their strength, they will need nobody to tell them to use it!

These strong, who for the weak make beauty sure,
How long will they endure
An earth of ashes and a sky of brass?

Correspondence

"The Noble Aryans"

TO THE NEW MASSES:

As a sociologist, I should like to supplement G. Gaard's excellent review of Howell's *Our Aryan Ancestors* in the October 8 issue of *THE NEW MASSES*.

The term "Aryan" has little or no scientific standing as a racial designation. It is, of course, a favorite term of popularizers of the myth of white superiority, and now widely used by the Nazis in their anti-Semitic glorification of the Teutons.

Bukharin (*Historical Materialism, A System of Sociology*, English tr., 1926; pp. 126-9) and many other Marxists have shown the role of fallacious race theory in beclouding social analysis.

In its limited scientific usage, the term "Aryan" refers to *language* and not to *race*! In rejecting the theory of "Aryanism," the Marxists are supported by the findings and opinions of many eminent bourgeois sociologists (see writings of Boas, Hertz, Hanks, Taylor et al.). The statement of Prof. F. H. Hanks of Smith College is authoritative:

... (Research) had made clear numerous similarities among what are now called the Indo-European or Aryan (or Indo-German) tongues. ... Accordingly it seemed logical to conclude that there must have been a race or people which spoke the original parent language. ... (It was claimed) that this supposititious Aryan race was especially gifted with culture-producing capacities and had, indeed, been the creator of all the great civilization both ancient and modern. ...

... (Contrary evidence) led scholars of the first rank even before 1890 to declare either that the Aryan doctrine was a figment of the professorial imagination or that it was incapable of clarification because the crucial evidence was lost, apparently forever.

("Aryanism," in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 2, pp. 264-65.)

Doubtless this is all quite familiar to the reviewer, but (perhaps due to space limitations) it is not sufficiently revealed and stressed in his review. To be sure, he disapprovingly places the term "Aryan race" in quotation marks, and condemns its loose, naive and vague use; but he neglects to inform the reader specifically of the actual *non-existence* of a "noble race" of Aryans—Dr. Howell and the Nazis to the contrary notwithstanding!

Chicago, Ill.

DALE ALLEN.

Mutiny in Michigan

TO THE NEW MASSES:

In Detroit, as well as in many other large communities in America, there exists a body of men who dedicate themselves to the welfare of their city. Such an organization is the Detroit Citizens League. One of the functions of this august body is to send questionnaires to office-seeking individuals and to find out their motives, intentions, political affiliations and esthetic tastes. If the candidate in question passes the above mentioned examination, as many do, he then stands the chance of being endorsed by this ever-vigilant League.

Those inclined to slander will come forward with rash statements like: "this League is just a tool in the hands of big business; they will never endorse anyone fighting for the rights of Labor" or "the Common Council is filled with grafters who were endorsed by the Detroit Citizens League." But we hasten to assure you that such talk is absolutely unfounded and should be labeled as propaganda. It is true, that up to date, many of those endorsed by the League have sooner or later succumbed to the temptation of pocketing a coin or so. We will also admit that the majority of office-holders, after being endorsed and proposed for office by the League, have forgotten their pledges to the voters and thought only of their own interests—but such phenomena

should be attributed to manifold influences which one faces in our complex society, phenomena which certainly cannot be foreseen by this body.

The League's inability to put an honest man into office, you will be convinced by now, is not its own fault; the only agency we can contribute it to is some supernatural power over which we humans have no control. But that its bad standing with the Almighty should prompt certain people to turn from it, is something we fail to understand. To illustrate our point we shall quote verbatim a copy of a letter received by the League from a man by the name of Maurice Sugar. It reads as follows:

Detroit Citizens League
1022 Dime Bank Bldg., Detroit, Mich.

Dear Sirs:

Enclosed you will find questionnaire submitted to Fay O'Camb. You already have the questionnaire of William McKie. As for Maurice Sugar, you already have all the information you want about him—more than you want, we are sure.

We are enclosing the Labor platform upon which McKie, O'Camb and Sugar are running. Read it—and weep.

May we add that if you were to consider any of us qualified for office, the unfortunate victim would be disposed to withdraw. We know that you are a political front for big business in the city. If you know your stuff you will be against us—for the same reasons that will prompt the workers and middle class elements to look favorably upon our candidacies.

Very truly yours,
(signed) MAURICE SUGAR.

This marks the first time in the history of our great city that a candidate or a group of candidates have deliberately refused the endorsement of this noble body. The conclusion which we are prompted to draw is this: either Mr. Sugar and his colleagues are turning from the League because of its poor batting average, or, they consider the Detroit Citizens League to be a body of men whose intentions are not at all times altruistic.

Detroit.

LEWIS FALL.

For Southern Miners

TO THE NEW MASSES:

The Committee in Support of Southern Miners has been formed to aid union organization in the Kentucky coal fields.

Work has already been started to awaken interest in and sympathy for rank-and-file unionism among the coal miners of Kentucky. The ultimate purpose of this work is to crystalize trade-union consciousness and to form locals of the United Mine Workers of America, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor.

It is unnecessary to point out to readers of *THE NEW MASSES* the necessity for such organization, or to describe the terrorist tactics which have met previous attempts of the miners to form their own unions.

This committee intends to publish a bulletin periodically informing its members of the progress of this work. We hope to give publicity to current conditions in that region and materially aid the miners in their struggles for decent living standards.

We ask *THE NEW MASSES* to publish this letter, urging their readers to join the Committee in Support of Southern Miners and give their active cooperation by

1. Making monthly pledges to support this work in Kentucky.
2. Making this project known among their friends and soliciting their personal cooperation.

LOUIS KAMSLY, Secretary, pro tem.

304 West 92nd St., Room 83,
New York City.

PROVISIONAL COMMITTEE: Charles Angoff, Newton Arvin, Lester Cohen, Henry Hart, Louis Kronenberger, Grace Lumpkin, William Mangold, Leane Zugsmith, Dr. Mark Graubard, Albert Halper, Abraham Isserman.

Letters in Brief

Creighton J. Hill of Wellesley Hills, Mass., writes to call Richard Wright's "Joe Louis Uncovers Dynamite" the "finest piece of writing that I have seen in any publication in a long time." He wants *THE NEW MASSES* to "turn more poets loose on assignments like this." Oril Brown, Evanston, Ill., protests against the "moral-pointing foreword" to Wright's article, asking "Can't you let a piece of creative writing speak for itself?" E. Colman of New York, writes that *THE NEW MASSES* showed "damned poor editorial sense" in publishing the article at all and that it will cost us the renewal of his subscription.

William Richards, of Los Angeles, sends in a renewal subscription and remarks that *THE NEW MASSES* becomes a trifle "too polysyllabically technical" on occasions. He wants simpler language.

S. M. A. of Manchester, England, writes to praise *THE NEW MASSES* and to inform us that the Manchester Theater of Action has recently given *Waiting for Lefty*.

George Blake of the Boston Committee for Equal Opportunities writes that the committee is waging a fight against school books that distort history about Negroes. One of the books about which the committee has complained is Kipling's *Captain Courageous* and he suggests that *THE NEW MASSES* deal with Kipling as an apologist for British imperialism.

Francis A. Henson of New York announces the publication on November 1 of a quarterly devoted to political, economic and social equality. The publication, *Race*, will deal with the Negro question. Genevieve Schneider is managing editor of the quarterly and editorial offices are located at 20 Vesey Street, New York.

The central dramatic group of the Associated Workers Clubs of 11 East 18th Street, New York, is seeking playwrights and actors.

The Downtown Music School, 799 Broadway, announces that it has secured the services of Hanns Eisler to give a course that will begin on Oct. 27. Lectures are designed for those with little or no musical training.

J. S. Hamilton of New York chides the reviewer of the first New Theater night for not making more allowances for "good intentions" in the dance numbers. He liked them as well as any other part of the program, he writes.

The American Friends of the Chinese People send us a resolution passed at their Oct. 9 banquet condemning Chiang Kai-shek and Premier Wang Chin-Wei for their refusal to fight against Japanese imperialism. A protest against Japan's invasion of China was also lodged.