

Waifs of the Storm

The Basque refugee children in England hold tight to two things: their poor, precious toys—and solidarity

By Naomi Mitchison

ON an English day of grey cloud and driving wind, four thousand Basque children landed at Southampton, to be welcomed by all decent people of the British Isles. All night the great lighted ship had waited outside the harbor, packed with children able to sleep at last without the terror of a snatched waking and the nightmare crashing in their ears. By morning helpers were waiting, baths, food, and the big buses to take them along to the camp.

The first thing that happened to them was that they were shot—with movie cameras; they ducked, and cried, and ran for shelter, so like is one modern invention to another. How were they to know these were not machine guns? All the trust that children should have in the kindness of the world was utterly shattered; it will take months at least to rebuild. They went cautiously into the big buses that took them to the camp, and hardly answered the cheering that greeted them there. Then a twelve-year-old hopped down, a strange little newcomer with his red socks and the pointed hood of his mackintosh. He was put at the head of the boys' queue; and, when boys and girls were formed up, they marched off through the camp to the furthest tents.

But they didn't know they were safe yet, they couldn't believe it. A sight-seeing aeroplane came swooping low over the camp, and panic-stricken children shrieked and bolted, cowering in the tents. The bogey-man had

come real this spring; they knew that rapidly rising wasp-hum—and what comes after. Not one of those children but knows. The helpers hardly asked why they were crying or what the matter was if any face was whiter, and more drawn, and tear-stained than another. Brothers and sisters were still out there; so were fathers and mothers. Alive or dead. Sometimes everyone was dead. Their whole world had been blotted out.

Yet they were a good deal more cheerful than some of the helpers expected; they bubbled over with excitement. They had heard and imagined so much of England. They wanted sweets, cinemas—and cigarettes! Someone found a black cat which had strayed into the camp; that was an unlucky color for them, and they chased it out with whoops and yells!

MOST OF THE CHILDREN had been healthy, bright, normal boys and girls. Some have been worse starved than others, but most should recover now that they have food. How surprising it was to see butchers' shops! They couldn't believe it at first. They had almost all been sea- or nerve-sick; they were crowded all over the ship—four of them in the cabin of Captain Ricardo Fernandez, the skipper who brought her over, and who was in command when rebel aeroplanes had tried to sink his ship the day before the children came on board. Some of them had walked miles to the harbor, since Franco's air-raids had even stopped the children's buses. And then the head wind against the boat! But, in the middle of it all, news had come that chaser planes had reached Bilbao, planes for them and their fathers and brothers; even the most seasick sat up and clapped at that.

They brought their poor little parcels on shore with them, parcels hastily tied up in newspaper, the oddest bundles. A few had hold of some toy, some familiar thing grasped tightly in this strange place. They stick together, holding hands often; no wonder that the Spanish embassy has had to refuse the kindest offers of adoption. Besides, it thinks the English are a childless race; these children would have to be overwhelmingly tidy, they wouldn't be able to play football in an English home. They will learn before they go that there are English boys and girls very ready to welcome them, but that is not the main point. These children must stay together; they have learned the bitter lesson of solidarity; now they must get the good of it.

There are several children from bombed Guernica, children who had seen flaming, roasting hell, and their own people in it. The

rest were very tender with them, brought them forward with arms around them. The Guernica children had seen the end of their childhood, and walked wearily away from it, with a few clothes, an ox, a broken doll, lucky if they had a mother's hand to hold to. They walked into waiting, tense, raided Bilbao. It takes a little time after that to get used to buttercups.



Flora Schofield

No one found it easy to question any of the children. The answers were too difficult for safe people with homes to face. "I'm nine years old. No, the rest are fighting. Father? He's in bed. He is rather ill." That gives a family picture. Or again: "Maria of the Angels. Fourteen. Yes, I was at a secondary school, and passed my matric. I don't know what I shall be. You see it's all changed now." She doesn't know. None of them know. It isn't in their hands or in their parents' hands any longer.

There is only one mother with them; she has come because she has five children on board—one a baby; but she has left four behind to fight. Otherwise the helpers have had to be mothers to these five- and six-year-olds, to make them feel safe, if they can. The wife and daughter of the Spanish ambassador were there, going from group to group, talking and smiling, with kind hands and voices. So was the Basque representative, for these children the "mutikoak"—lovely Basque word for a lot of kids!—feel themselves Basque to the core. And besides, friends from all over the country have sent clothes, and books, and toys. Here and there a manufacturer has sent food. Doctors and nurses have given their services. The children are welcome for as long as they need to stay.

And at home? Someone had a brilliant idea; she brought a packet of postcards for the children to write home on. A whole sack full came up to the Spanish embassy, to be stamped and sent off. That will be something. And a film of their arrival has been sent back to Bilbao, to the mothers and fathers. Perhaps they will never have seen these movies of their children. For they were facing the thing which we in England are trying to make the children forget—death from the air, the merciless low swoop with the machine-guns pointed wherever two or three are gathered together in the name of liberty.



Adelene Cross

Rigidity Will Have to Alter

A Pulitzer prize-winning American novelist sees the question of the writer's technique conditioned by the flux and complexity of the day

By Josephine Johnson

In attempting to evaluate the experience of novelists who have dealt with social themes in recent years, critics have been sharply divided, both as to the formulation of the problems which confront the creative writer and as to the answers to those problems. For that reason we have asked two outstanding American novelists who have treated social themes to discuss certain aspects of the general problem. This article by Josephine Johnson and that by Millen Brand on the page opposite were focused on the following questions raised by us: (1) What new problems of technique confront the novelist who is concerned with a social theme? (2) How much guidance is there in such social novelists of the 1920's as Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, and Dos Passos? (3) What do you conceive to be the social effect, direct or indirect, of your work on the reader, and is the consciousness of such an effect an inhibiting or a liberating influence on the writer?—THE EDITORS.

IT IS difficult for an author to formulate any particular creed or testament of writing in these times, but unconsciously we work by certain standards and toward certain goals. I cannot speak except from a personal viewpoint—not because I believe that what I say is of universal value or representative, but because it is the only view on which one can honestly speak with authority. The problem of technique is a particular difficulty which confronts a writer in handling the many characters essential to a theme of large scope and action. Wide knowledge, mass action, mass stimuli, constant and varied sensation, collective discovery—these things which are today irrevocably a part of our lives—threaten to burst the orthodox conception of a novel

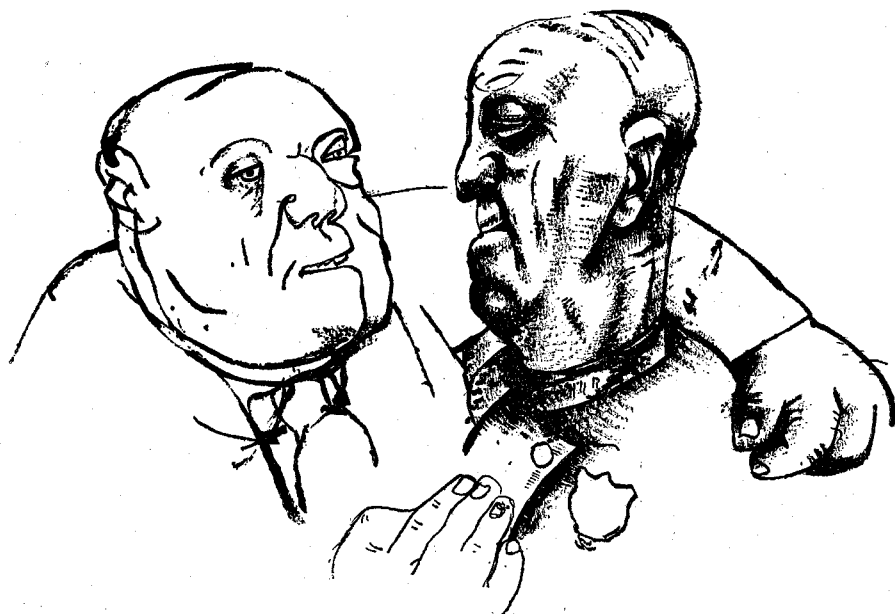
and spill out formlessly over the pages. Shall we express all this only as a background, concentrating development on only a few characters? Can an individual's problem or character ever be wholly dissociated from the communal life and treated as such? I believe that the showing of the world through individual reaction is still the most powerful and effective form of writing, the bringing to life and three-dimensional personality of what is otherwise one atom in a multiple swarm; but—and this is the answer to my second question—realizing that the environment is responsible for much of that individual's character. There is no doubt that any rigid form of writing will have to alter to be able to express the ever-increasing complexity, apparent confusion, and flux of these days. Personally I am not concerned about the technical definition of a novel. What is important is the thing itself accomplished. Is it good? Bad? Weak? Effective? Not is it classed this or labeled that. It is more important to consider the living body as a whole, asking if it is well and vigorous and beautiful in its own way. Not dissecting it to find out its organs and its ancestors.

I have felt under an obligation to make each line and word of writing in a book interesting and of some value in itself—to contribute, as a cell does, to the whole, and yet be justified in its own right. Perhaps it is necessary to build more spaciouly, to bore in order to convince; but surely the arid wastes of sand between

oasis and oasis of memorable writing only increase the irritation of the traveler rather than persuade him of the grandeur of the desert. We who write today of today are under the handicap of selecting the transitory from the enduring, and of being judged (naturally and inescapably) by contemporary myopia. The new phrase, the passing reference, the modern allusion may become in time mellowed by usage and the dignity of precedent, thus assuming the character of classic knowledge. We may know this is so, seeing ahead with humble prophecy through reference to the past; but today the words pop from the page like jack-in-the-boxes, and we are accused, naturally enough, of dated writing and newspaper timelessness, propaganda and ephemerality. These are things to be faced by any writer who wishes his work to be of lasting interest, and to survive beyond his time. And they are not easily answered.

The consciousness that one's work may be of social significance and effective in one way or another, can be both a driving force and a cautioning check on a writer. It is likely to make him hesitate and ponder too much over the consequences, to make him waver in the face of certain stubborn truths which do not fit into his planned effect. Shall I say this? Emphasize that? Omit this other because it may be misunderstood? Shall I leave this loophole for the opposition? These questionings are sometimes fatal, this social consciousness a winding sheet around creative growth. In spite of the driving force which a major belief may give, and the strong power which it momentarily engenders, if obeyed blindly, it is apt to hurtle the author over the cliff and result in unintentional suicide. It is the artist's very life-necessity to see with open eyes, to record, to sift, to create and interpret without the restrictions that limit a druggist or a mechanic. The author is not a writer of prescriptions.

The form of life is so fluid, so open to speculation and interpretation, that to impose rigid channels, even though glorifying them with the name of Social Obligation and Duty, is to run the risk of stagnation, more fatal than any flood. Truth is never obvious beyond all question. If a writer is honest, and conscious that he is not, after all, a mysteriously blessed and irresponsible gift of heaven to mankind, he will take upon himself the task of examining his position in relation to the world, and of finding truth wherever it is discoverable, and of creating what seems important according to his own standards and not the world measuring-rods of the hour.



John Holiker

"But the steel company wouldn't like you if you became a movie star; we like you best as just a plain Chicago cop."