

This Proletarian Stuff

BY MARTIN PITTMAN

A coal-miner gives his opinion of the Literary Left

I AM a coal-miner from Illinois. Mining being what it is these days, I have plenty of time to read and I go to the library in our town and look over these high-brow weekly papers, every now and then. I have been reading in some of them about what they call "proletarian literature." Sometimes they call it "prolet-cult." It seems that a lot of the spectacled lads in New York are tearing their shirts about this new writing. One bunch says that the old ways of writing where a man wrote about anything that came into his head and let the chips fall where they may were the best. The other crowd claims that the old ways are washed up and that from now on you will read more and more about coal-diggers and other working stiffs.

Although most of the boys around here, especially the younger bunch, would think "proletarian" was some new drink, we old heads know what it means all right. Most of us used to belong to the Socialist party and in the old days we would sit around Jake's place and jaw about proletarians and bourgeoisie and the class struggle and all that. After Wilson, the big stiff, had nearly killed Gene Debs by sticking him in

Atlanta, the old man used to come down here and line out the class struggle. Of course, we didn't get all of it but we figured that the old man was pretty near Jesus and anything he said went with us.

It was along about that time, right after the War, that a whole mess of books and pamphlets and what not started up telling all about the labor problem. I used to get a heap of them from a college lad who was through here from some league or other and who had me doped out as a "key man," whatever he meant by that.

I never read such free, wide and handsome language as some of those college professors and economists and the like flung around. There were pieces about "cross-sections" in the labor movement. I finally figured out that this referred to the Left Wingers in the American Federation of Labor who wanted to can old Sam Gompers. And there were pieces about "the victories of the craft unions" and "the function of the intelligentsia in the labor movement" and a whole lot more. I had them written down, the titles I mean, on a piece of paper that my old lady threw out when we was

moved last spring. So I haven't got them all, but I do remember one piece in particular. It was called, *A Critical Analysis of the Pit Committees of the United Mine Workers of America*. It was written by a college boy who was looking for some kind of a degree.

I took this over and read it out loud to Angelo who was our one-man pit committee at that time. Angelo was a good fighter (he beat the lights out of a couple of straw-bosses), but he was kind of dumb. When I read this thing to him, he just sat there and rolled his eyes around and kept saying, "Whad da hell?" He couldn't get it through his thick head why a man who could get to college should spend his time writing about pit committees.

WELL, all that labor problem stuff was shot to pieces in the fall of 1929, when it turned out that the main problem about labor was where to get any. And now, as I figure it, this proletarian literature row is taking its place.

Of course, you can trace most of it back to Russia. I knew a Communist once who used to tell the boys that over there they had got up a prolet-cult and that this would be the next thing all over. He wasn't very plain about just what it was, but generally it seemed to be making motion-pictures of steam-engines and tractors and electric plants instead of pretty gals and writing books about the tough time the peasants used to have and how they had got over them. Most of the boys here didn't think much of the idea. They said they saw enough steam-engines and electric plants

every day and when they went to the pictures they liked to see plenty of necking and some females in something else than day dresses. This Communist was pretty discouraged about us anyhow. He said we were no better than bourgeoisie. Big Mike, who worked next to me at the time, wanted to sock him for this until I explained that bourgeoisie meant nothing worse than salesmen and dentists and the like. Mike quieted down when this was explained because he was sending his kid to a dental school in St. Louis and he couldn't figure that bourgeoisie was a dirty crack if it just meant dentists.

Anyhow the Communists seem to be pretty smart at getting their ideas around among the high-brows even if they have no luck with us, and it looks like this prolet-cult has caught on. After the mine went down last spring, the wife and I took the kids up to Chicago to leave them in my sister's boarding-house there, and I sneaked off and saw one of these Russian pictures. It wasn't half bad. A lot of sailors got sore at their officers and rose up and lammed them with anything lying around loose and stuck bayonets in them and drowned them upside down and all. The officers had it coming to them because they had served rotten meat to the sailors and kicked them around a lot. I was thinking what a tough time Russian sailors must have, when a little fellow who was wearing glasses and was sitting in front of me, jumped up from his seat and turned round and grabbed my hand and started to pump it. "Comrade," he hollered so that every one in the place turned

to look, and I felt awful foolish, "I see you are a worker. What those workers have done, we can do."

I pulled him out in the lobby and tried to explain to him that I was a coal-miner not a sailor, and where I came from we had plenty to gripe us besides the troubles of Russian sailors. But he went right on chewing the fat about a revolution, so that I was scared some dick would come along and run us in and I beat it.

When I got back home I wrote to that college boy I mentioned before and asked him did he have any of this new proletarian literature. He sent me along three, four books. Two by Upton Sinclair, but of course, I had followed after Upton Sinclair for a long time back. One was by a fellow with a Spanish sounding name, though I guess he is an American because he knows all about a lot of places here. Say, this was a hot one. You wouldn't believe it until you saw them in print, the words he put in that book. All the things we used to holler at each other in the army and what you call straw-bosses when they ain't around and a lot more besides. There were plenty of people in this book, men and women both, and they were all the time climbing in and out of bed with each other and getting snozzled so often it was a wonder they ever got to work at all.

I kept the book out of sight when the kids were around; but one night when I was alone in the house Mike came in and asked me what I was reading. I told him and read one of the smokiest parts out loud. Mike is no lily but he kept looking over his shoulder to see if anybody

was coming in the door. I felt kind of funny myself, sitting there reading out of a regular book things you just see written up in back-houses.

After awhile Mike says:

"Is this what that Communist fellow was talking about? Prolet-something."

I told him that was what my college buddy said it was and Mike scratched his head. Finally he said:

"Hell, if that's what it is, I don't see no trick to that. I should think almost anybody could load a turn like that."

When he went home, I saw he had something on his mind and sure enough, a day or two later, he came up to me in the wash-house and gave me a piece he had written himself. It went like this, only I am not putting in the regular words;

"'So-and-so your lousy job,' said Michael, the brave, strong coal miner whose muscles stood out all over him like iron bands. He was speaking to the skunk who was his foreman, the low so-and-so. 'So-and-so yourself,' said the foreman, the greasy so-and-so, 'and take a walk for yourself down the tracks.' So Michael was fired, but what did he care? He went out and got two gallons of mule and a gal with lovely, deep blue eyes and she was nuts about him and they went to New York where her old man, who was very rich, had a big place with a couple butlers and they lay around stewed to the gills late every morning until about nine o'clock and when Michael heard the whistle blow, he used to sit up in bed and shout: 'So-and-so your lousy whistle,' and his gal would laugh and kiss him like anything."

There was quite a lot more, all about how this digger beat up a bunch of New York City slickers and how stewed he got all over the place. Some of it sure did sound like what was in that prolet book but there were other parts that didn't seem to click, especially the parts about New York. Mike never was in New York. All he knows about it is what he sees in the pictures and what a powder salesman named Greenbaum told him. You see, in his piece everybody in New York was just filthy rich, throwing parties all the time.

Finally I had to tell Mike I didn't think his piece would go over.

"You see," I said, "if you had been to a college and had some sort of a rep as a writer this might do. But as it is, you being just a shovel-stiff, you don't get the real hang of this proletarian writing. What they aim at is to interpret the American working class." (I remembered that one from a book I read.)

"You would think we was all hunkies," said Mike.

And then I told him what interpretation means and showed him how his New York stuff couldn't be right.

"Everybody there can't be so stinking rich," I said. "Look at those big tailors' unions. They ain't all sitting pretty."

"Aw," he said, "what if some of them are poor? Nobody wants to read about poor people. What I like is these country club pictures and the stories about dude polo players and I guess most of the rest of the boys like them too."

It was no use arguing. He sent off the piece anyway to a New York editor. He hasn't heard from it since.

I guess that editor figured he was getting a poison pen letter after he read the first few lines.

SO IT looks like what proletarian writing is going to be done will be written by white collars and not by any of us. And that being the case, I wish I could get a bunch of these literary boys and artists and the like out here in the coal-camp and set them up to some home-brew and line it out to them something like this:

"Now you boys have been finding out for the past three years what it feels like to get kicked in the pants. When you begin to straighten out and get your breath, you see us standing nearby maybe grinning a little bit, because most of us, coal-diggers, loom-fixers, tailors, railroad men, have known that warm feeling in the rear since we were old enough to work. All the time you were writing pretty pieces about young love all dressed up and tony adultery and the spasms of sobbing souls, we were mucking around out here, sweating and grunting to get our three squares a day, with the foremen blowing down the backs of our necks and our own men in the unions and such political parties as we could whistle up selling us out one way or the other. Now you've sort of stumbled across us. You are getting lathered up about discovering us and you are running to get down your copies of Marx and the other old heads and you look across the way to Russia and wonder how they turned the apple-cart over and why the same can't be done here.

"Now if you are with us for a spell and not just taking this thing up as a hobby, that is jake with us. We are dumb all right, but we aren't

dumb enough to think that we don't need every ounce of brains there is in this country. If you go back a ways and read into the history of labor in these United States (and for the love of God, do that thing before you start working on us) you will find that from the days of John Swinton and even before him, there were always some of your class hitched up one way or another with us. There was Joseph Weydemeyer with his Proletarierbund talking Marx in much the same high-brow fashion you are, in 1853. There was the bunch of professors on the fringes of the Knights of Labor, Richard T. Ely and John Bascom and others. There was Henry George and ex-Professor Daniel De Leon and scads of others not so well known and then one day Sam Gompers rolled onto the stage and put the boot to the lot of them. Highbrows worried Sam. He was afraid they would put ideas into the heads of his boys and Sam was business unionism, pure and simple. When your crowd was chased out and the workers waved 'No Help Wanted' signs every time a man who smelled of college came down the road, your crowd turned to political action and let the trades unions pretty well alone. Well, the unions staggered on all right, through the War and a little while afterwards. But having been kept clear of ideas of what it was all about, when they headed into this thing that has us all down now, they couldn't put up a fight that would do credit to a sick kitten. They had hollered hours and wages and promised to be good so long that you couldn't tell the difference between a convention of the United Mine Workers and the United Ro-

tarians. They both spoke the same language, waved the same flag, lapped up the same apple-sauce. Labor leaders shouldered each other around the pie-counters and the rank and file watched them get away with murder, only regretting they couldn't get in on the festivities. And when the end of all those happy days finally came and we wanted men to stand up and scrap for us we found that we had on hand as President of the A. F. of L. the leader of the biggest Bible class in Coshocton, Ohio, with a slick insurance salesman and lawyer for his right-hand man.

"So now boys the field is wide and open for any one with guts, brains and patience to step in and help build something from the ground up. If you can do this by telling the truth not only about the Fat Boys way up on top of us all, but also about some of the lesser skunks we have hoisted up as leaders, come along in. Only don't forget about that patience. Three years ago we was all riding around in automobiles on Sunday afternoons with our mouths open, wondering how soon our darling children would get to be bank presidents. You fellows want to write about the proletariat. Okay. But first you got to get a proletariat to write about. It takes more than three years to make one of those things, though I must say the said Fat Boys are fast workers. You can't pick up men like Mike and heave them by the scruff of their red necks bing into Marx. The smartest man in the labor outfit today, Oscar Ameringer, says teaching American labor anything is like feeding melted butter on the end of a hot awl to a wild-cat. Oscar said it. Please pass the brew."

Point of Honor

BY PAUL HORGAN

A Story

"**W**HERE do we go? Do we go in here? Is it upstairs? I thought it would be one of those places with a large window," said Miss Cadman, pulling her long fur around her lifted shoulders. She looked with eyes like lenses at Mr. Dunn. He smiled at her bright impersonal regard, and touched her elbow. They went through the narrow door and started up the carpeted stairs. Beside them traveled a white banister. The hallway was plastered in white, with modeled roses and cornices, browned at the edges by time and soot. They finally reached a door that had a chromium plate lettered in black: "Regan Galleries."

"I'm *always* buying pictures," said Miss Cadman, pausing and squeezing her purse against her bosom so that her long diamond brooch turned upward and winked with light.

"There's just the thing in here for your book room," said Mr. Dunn, hoping that Tom was in, as he had promised to be. He opened the door, elbowing Miss Cadman into the room. There was more white plaster, coming to a stop without reflection at a brown wooden floor. The front windows, uncurtained, gave on

Fifty-Seventh Street, where the late afternoon sun painted a likeness of a city landscape. Miss Cadman began tiptoeing, with her eyes widened, her mouth pursed in an immediate reverence. She looked at the Negro sculpture, the tan canvas background for the water colors on the side wall, and the brass bust of a woman's skull with two brass fingers at its throat. No one was there. On an easel by the marble fireplace, suggesting the dwelling place of the past that the brownstone front of the building had failed to conjure, was a landscape in the romantic style, golden brown, with leaves like shadows.

Miss Cadman turned to Mr. Dunn.

"Should they leave it like this?" she asked in a whisper. "Anybody could come in and make off with anything . . ."

"Tom ought to be here," he said. "I'll see."

Miss Cadman sat down in a cherry velvet armchair and lighted a cigarette. She laid her heavy purse symbolically on her large thighs and waited, with a trace of wealthy defiance. Mr. Dunn went to the door in the corner, and looked through.