

The Novelist's Opportunity

SPEAKING not long ago before a gathering of writers, Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt called the attention of the novelists among them to the opportunity which was peculiarly theirs to make the various parts of the United States known to one another. The divergences among the sections were, she pointed out, at once great and small, and not until the separate regions had come into understanding of their differences as well as awareness of their likenesses could they be counted on for that unity of purpose which alone could ensure safety to the nation in this world of chaos. It was the novelist's opportunity in particular, she said, because the public that shies away from the economic or political tract can be beguiled through a story into taking their lessons to heart.

There is no doubt that the writer of fiction is already on the road that Mrs. Roosevelt would have him follow. The regional novel has been appearing with increasing frequency of late, moving from the bayous of Louisiana and the hammock land of Florida, or the Iowa farm country and the Ozark mountain section, to the mining districts of Pennsylvania and the lettuce fields of California. Sometimes with pity, sometimes with cheer, sometimes with indignation the novelist has projected his group against its special scene. And there can be no question that he is awaking a consciousness of the complicated sets of problems that confront the country.

But the novelist has an even more difficult function to perform than that of interpreter, for it has devolved upon him to a great extent to be the organ for establishing a scale of social values. In pre-radio, pre-movie, pre-automobile days, when fashions and manners and ideas traveled more slowly than now, a cultural lag developed that left one part of the country clinging to conventions that the other had already outworn. The centers of sophistication, like the large cities of the Atlantic seaboard and the few others throughout the country which ap-

proximated to them in wealth and intellectual initiative, were always a lap ahead of the small towns and the rural districts, leaving these latter to preserve standards of taste and judgment that were beginning to crumble in the others. We counted it good that this was so, and in the face of fads and follies believed that the essential America, the America of the thousands of modest-sized towns, of small hamlets, of the farms, was sound at the core. The "back country" was a sort of seine through which new ideas, daring innovations, breaks with tradition and manners, were filtered and purified. There was established a sort of natural system of checks and balances which served as a regulator of values.

The spectacular development of the radio, the movie, the motor car, the widely distributed picture magazine has greatly changed all that. Today there is very little lag. Every part of the country receives its impressions simultaneously with every other, and as a result the modifying influence of social conservatism has been greatly relaxed. Unless some corrective agency can be found, standardized opinions as well as standardized gadgets threaten to engulf the country. Unless our society can see itself

in some perspective it runs the risk of a confusion of values. Now, it is the novelist's business to see life in perspective and to distil from experience some pattern for existence. In proportion as his fiction can read meaning into living it takes on value and significance, and in proportion as it can distinguish and discriminate between the lasting and the fugitive, it becomes an active social force. The novelist sees society not as something static; but as the resolution of forces constantly at play upon one another. And just as with the individual he seeks for the explanation of conduct in the hidden springs of personality, so with society he looks beneath the surface for the motives that shape behavior and action. His picture of society is analytic as well as photographic. More than ever now, when the barriers that the hinterland opposed to extravagance of thought and behavior are yielding, the novelist has an opportunity to serve his fellows by portraying the society of which they are a part in just proportions and proper articulation. And his opportunity is his obligation. For, as Mrs. Roosevelt remarked, they will read his story when they will not read the moralist's or the scholar's book.

A. L.

L'Ennuyée

BY MAY LEWIS

NOW to begin again . . . another Friendship!
 A long, platonic, involute affair—
 My forehead aches; I feel a need for air—
 Knowing, minutely well, how it will be!
 My warm, acquisitive, intellectual yearning;
 Your not robust appeal for sympathy;
 Those lengthy explorations of the soul,
 While I, with just that drooping, tender touch
 Arrange your flowers in a crystal bowl.
 You will receive, and treasure, a brief note;
 Raptly, antiphonally, we no doubt will quote
 Proust or compare the poets—recall a line,
 Enraptured that your favorite should be mine;
 Or carefully dissect, two chairs apart,
 Our delicate reactions to Mozart;
 Matching experience with pale examples
 Like shaded silks or millinery samples.
 I know so very well how it will be!
 Exchange of humor—the quick, flinty urge,
 And then the deep impinging,
 The spiritual unhinging—
 We will emerge
 With mental, thin antennae
 As sticky as the outstretched hand of any
 Child after a birthday party.
 Oh, let us in the name of heaven be hearty!
 Let us be swift and hate,
 And separate,
 Or forthright,
 Throwing down at once the glove,
 Let us be frank
 And love.

Letters to the Editor: *Unreadable Poetry;* *Carolina Governors*

Modern Poetry and All That

SIR:—It gave me much pleasure to read William R. Benét's critical remarks on modern poetry in your March 4th issue. A reader of the best poetry in several languages over a period of years, I heartily agree with everything he said in his admirable article, which I have pasted into my copy of Housman's "The Name and Nature of Poetry."

I hope Mr. Benét's article will be widely read and digested by every poet and editor throughout the country. After all, the editors are largely responsible for what has been imposed on the public in the way of verse. Much of modern poetry, so called, is unreadable, much of it is confused and lacking in rhythm. Robert Frost spoke for a multitude of readers when he said in one of his lectures, "I don't want to be bothered by a poem, I want to be thrilled."

M. K. GRAY.

Hartford, Conn.

"Why Was Lincoln Murdered?"

SIR:—In your issue of February 4th Allan Nevins states that in 1937 and 1938 only one first class, blue-ribbon historical book was produced in this country.

I wish to take exception to this statement. In my opinion Otto Eisenschiml's "Why Was Lincoln Murdered?" meets this specification. Besides blowing the lid off a mystery of history and bringing out more new facts and new approaches than can ordinarily be found in any volume, it has caused an avalanche of literature on the assassination to follow in its wake, all of which more or less leans on the material produced by Eisenschiml's research efforts.

Professor Paul Buck, reviewing the book in your issue of March 27, 1937 said that Eisenschiml's book, "might well result in a wholly new re-examination of the later Civil War and early Reconstruction Period. Eisenschiml takes his place deservedly along with Herndon, Nicolay and Hay, Beveridge and Barton, as an indispensable item in Lincolniana."

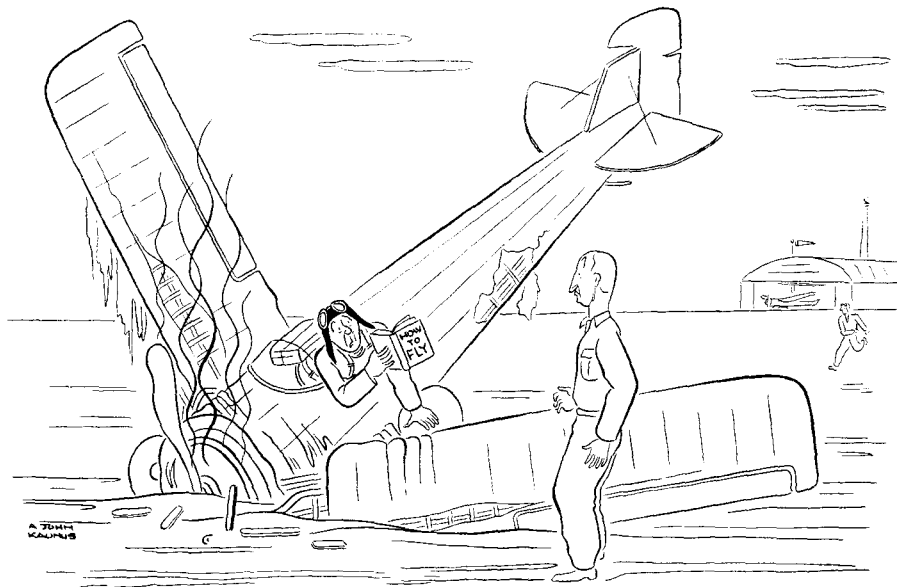
In the light of this how can Allan Nevins brush this work aside as unimportant? History could stand some more books that are neither biography nor rehash of well-known facts.

JOHN W. CURRAN.

De Paul University,
Chicago, Ill.

Long Time Between Drinks

SIR:—P. E. G. Quercus ought to get our governors straight. Zeb Vance was our Civil War governor, following Governor Swain who became president of the University of North Carolina—the old saying being, "'Old Bunck' was governor of the state and then they sent him to Chapel Hill to educate him." And the famous remark about the long time between drinks was made to Governor Edward B. Dudley, who was governor from 1839 to 1841. This happened at the old Henry Jones place about nine and a half miles west of Raleigh, and the side-



"Why don't these books have an index?"

board on which the bottles stood is still in the Jones family. Mason Pierce Butler was the Governor of South Carolina, and they say one reason the saying became so well known was that the remark was "It's a damn long time between drinks," and the butler was shocked and repeated it to his mistress who was a good Methodist lady and properly shocked also. And then back the butler hurried with the drinks.

LUCY M. COBB.

Raleigh, N. C.

Meringue and Manure

SIR:—I am neither publisher, editor, critic, nor writer. I am a rank outsider. But I am not quite so rank as the reform school of criticism of which Mr. Wallace Stegner [reviewer of "Wind without Rain," *SRL*, February 11] is one graduate. There are others and I hope he will excuse me for lighting the fuse with his match.

I have earned by living in eight countries, in cities large and small, in towns, camps, and in the open country. I have fought frostbite in Wisconsin and perspiration in Rio. I have both tightened my belt and let it out. I have learned one thing.

The man who damns the other fellow's point of view has a point of view himself that isn't worth a damn. It is easy to call names and make faces but when you do it means just one thing to the man who has been around enough to really know how people act. It means there isn't a shot in your locker.

Another thing. Truth is wherever you find it. Manure is no more true than meringue. It has a more noticeable stink so more people get hep to it. Obvious seems to be the literary word for it. Manure is more obvious than meringue. It takes no more skill to spread it. I'll say that, and I have spread both. I have a high opinion of both, too.

As for hasheesh, don't you fool yourself. It will "ratify" your "comfortable superstitions" about manure just as quick as it will those about meringue. It looks as if the manure superstitions of such critics have got them hog-tied so tight they don't need hasheesh. They won't deal in anything but manure. They will even pass up lemon pie. What I want is more of both and better.

Thank you.

MARSHALL CALHOUN.

Madison, Wis.

Holidays and Festivals

SIR:—I am collecting new material for a three- or four-volume anthology on all of the American holidays and festivals. Contributions of poems, articles, essays, epigrams, stories, plays, tableaux, games, exercises, etc., are solicited, and will be carefully considered. Return postage should be enclosed, with authorized permission for reproduction, or address of copyright holder. These volumes will complete and bring down to date my series "Our American Holidays" (18 vols. Dodd, Mead & Co.).

ROBERT HAVEN SCHAUFFLER.

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New York City.

André Malraux

SIR:—I am preparing a study on André Malraux and should appreciate receiving from your readers any information they may possess on this writer. Of course I am especially interested in unpublished letters or documents of biographical or literary interest, but even a reference to a published item that may have escaped my attention would be welcome and receive proper credit.

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