



## NO TIME FOR COMEDY?

ONE of the dislocations attendant on the transition from a nothing-can-touch-us economy to a we'd-better-get-ready economy is already apparent in the literature business, reflected in the countless debates now going on as to what writers ought to write about—the old anti-thesis between the dust of battle and the ivory tower, but now with a far more immediate and urgent application. From one point of view, of course, there is no argument; writers ought to write about what they feel like writing about. But this counsel of perfection has not been too closely followed in the United States of late years; the larger part of American literary production represents not what a writer wants to write about, but what he (or his agent, or his publisher, or his pet magazine editor) thinks the customers want him to write about. The tendency is not to be condemned offhand; authors are not exempt from the general human inclination to eat, and they may legitimately hope that whatever they have to say will find as large and as receptive an audience as possible. For the writer who has something to say on current topics, and wants large numbers of people to hear it, inclination and advantage coincide; but the times are hard and may presently be harder, on those whose talent is for entertainment, or for comedy.

Any psychologist, I suppose, would say that both these types should be encouraged—the comedian especially—for their contribution to the national effort, a contribution which they make by doing their stuff rather than by trying to step out of character. The man who is working hard can work harder and better if he gets occasional relaxation, especially the relaxation of laughter. But that implies something that he can laugh at, and our comic writers may find themselves increasingly hard up for topics.

A couple of examples may serve as guide posts; and one who has no time to read books unless they deal with the Situation finds it easier as well as less invidious to choose examples from another art. The most successful comedy picture of the summer was the unpretentious but delightful "I Love You Again," which had nothing to do with the current disorders. It was a period piece, but of a period recent enough to be familiar; it was indeed the world of April, 1940, which we shall never see again but to whose total disappearance many people have not yet been able to adjust themselves. Its problems, such as they were, were purely personal, and so odd that the customers could never get a twinge of too personal sympathy.

Much more ambitious and much less successful was the production of one of the most distinguished artists of our time—"The Great Dictator." The common objection to it is that the ending was out of keeping with the rest; that the pseudo-dictator's speech, while all very well if you had read it in Dorothy Thompson's column or at the *Herald-Tribune* Forum or the even heard it from Charles Chaplin Town Hall, was as impossible for the character he was playing as it was incongruous with the rest of the picture. But some of us had felt a more profound incongruity long before that; two stories had been combined, in alternating sections, and a trick in which some literary critics discerned Great Art when William Faulkner did it made less impression on their harder-boiled colleagues who cover the movies. Especially since one of these stories was comedy, the other tragedy. The root difficulty in "The Great Dictator" is simply that Hitler and his doings are no longer funny.

Any writer in any field might learn from this the useful lesson of obsolescence of ideas. "The Great Dictator" had been on the fire for years; in 1934 or even in 1935 Hitler and Mussolini still had their legitimate comic aspects. But in 1940 you can't laugh them off. As Chaplin doubtless recognized as he got deeper into production; for the fact is that "The Great Dictator" is essentially a quite effective tragic picture, into which have been interpolated some farcical scenes—funny enough in themselves, but out of tune with the rest.

There is a touch of tragedy, of course, in most Chaplin pictures; but the tragic aspects of "The Gold Rush" and "Modern Times" were of a different order. In "Modern Times" to be sure the machine age was something of a villain, but there were tragic touches in that picture which were simply the *lacrimae rerum*, a recognition of the uncomfortable conditions of being human. Tragedy and comedy could be effectively intermingled, as they are in Shakespeare, because the tragedy dealt with universals valid at all times—things that happen to us because we are human, and will go on happening even when the battle flags are furled and the front pages will have no more exciting news than debates in the Parliament of Man. But the tragedy in "The Great Dictator" is not something that inevitably happens and always will happen; it is something that is being done to us, or to people like us. No amount of slapstick can make those ghetto scenes funny, with their pervading background of perpetual menacing terror; the most Aryan of spectators cannot help feeling about them just as a Jew would feel, now that most of Europe

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## And Tomorrow

By Ben Ray Redman

MIND turns upon itself to kill:  
The suicidal flesh lays bare  
Its own doomed heart: the lethal will  
Forbids the servile hand to spare.

Were this the death that brings release,  
Then might we sink in thankfulness:  
Shut weary eyes, be glad to cease:  
Put off the hair-shirt of distress:

Call quits to all for which we fought,  
Give over dreams for nullity:  
Forgetful that we ever wrought,  
Contented to no longer be.

But in this dying there's no rest.  
The old ascent begins again:  
The stone bears down upon the breast—  
And Sisyphus renews his pain.

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Thoreau and Women

SIR:—May I, somewhat hesitantly, abstract, from a review of my biography of "Thoreau" in the October *American Historical Review* by Professor Arthur E. Bestor, Jr., of Columbia, an item of the greatest interest to lovers of Thoreau which should be brought to the attention of students of American literature as well as historians. I have dealt at length in my biography of the mysterious woman who tried to marry Thoreau and made him complain bitterly to Emerson that his career was threatened. Thanks to an unpublished family letter and an unpublished portion of a letter from Emerson to Thoreau, I was able to build up a reasonable surmise that it was neither a young girl named Ford who might have loved him, nor Margaret Fuller who, just possibly, would have liked to love him, but an obscure Sophia Foord, friend of Lydia Emerson and teacher of her children, who made such an unwanted contribution to Thoreau's emotional contacts. Some natural skepticism as to the validity of my conclusions was expressed, for the tradition that Thoreau was a cold and sexless man unattractive to women, dies hard in academic breasts. Professor Bestor, however, has discovered what was the missing link in my testimony—the words of the woman herself. I quote:

Mr. Canby's conjectures are . . . vindicated by an unnoted passage in the biography of Elizabeth Buffum Chace by Zillie B. C. and Arthur C. Wyman (Boston, 1914, 1,131). In 1854, five years after the rumor of her suicide . . . Miss Sophia Foord (her name was often so spelled in Concord) . . . a dark-skinned, pudgy-featured woman, "was serving as governess in the abolitionist household of Mrs. Chace. She taught botany by means of field trips, and her pupils felt that she "brought Concord to Valley Folk (R. J.)" In private moments she "confided to Mrs. Chace her convictions that Thoreau's soul was twin to hers, and that in 'the other world' her spirit and his would be united."

I am sorry that the mysterious lady proves to have been pudgy-faced," but what, for those who know Thoreau and Transcendentalism, a situation is revealed in the Emerson household, where both man and woman were in residence! It is a theme for Eugene O'Neill!

HENRY SEIDEL CANBY.

Clinton, Conn.

## "What's Wrong with Authors!"

SIR:—In your October 12 issue Mr Cerf told "what's wrong with authors?," but he didn't include mention of the now epidemic tendency to stumble and fall over the phrase "tend to" (knitting, for instance). Is it gen-



"Travers hasn't been human since he got that personal rejection slip from *Startling Stories*."

erally thought that "attend to" sounds pedantic? Or isn't it known that "tend" in this sense is a transitive verb, requiring no preposition? If writers refuse to choose between these extreme alternatives, won't they at least use an apostrophe for a crutch to get them over the obstacle? It may sound like baby-talk to say "I'll 'tend to my knitting and you 'tend to yours"; but at least it won't look, in print, like la belle Malaprop.

This is doubtless a picayune matter. For years I have merely gnashed the teeth in silence (a neat trick in any week), but I am stirred to audibility when even so respected a semanticist as Mr. J. Chamberlain (in the same issue with Mr. Cerf) lets fly such a conditional clause as: "If the United States could grow so great merely by tending to its knitting. . . ." The cause and the development of this country's past or future greatness are not picayune matters. If there is truth in another of Mr. Chamberlain's observations, concerning our "verbal reflexes" ("Simply because we have been taught to respond to the phrases of 'liberty,' 'equality,' and 'freedom,' we are safe no matter what the economic form of the future"), then there might be danger from promiscuous solecistic use of the phrase "tend to knitting":—there might be danger that if the country is to grow more great by "attending to knitting" and yet goes about talking of "tending to knitting," the upshot will be a nation of pseudo-knitters who, not knowing quite what they mean, merely "have a tendency" toward their proper business, instead of "really doing" something about it.

Can you imagine *Candide*, for instance, merely "tending to" his garden?—no apostrophe, no baby-talk, no anything!

HANSELL BAUGH.

Philadelphia, Pa.

## County Editors and Teachers

SIR:—Mr. Richards' letter published in the issue of Oct. 19th interests me. In the first place, I like his opinion of the *Review* since I too feel that it has helped me to crystallize my opinions and served to clarify many issues. Secondly, as an ex-schoolteacher and current small newspaper woman, I naturally found his letter provocative. Many of us do not wish to be throttled and rendered passive by increasing restrictions upon our ways of thinking. Yet as Mr. Richards so truly said, we hesitate to become avowed reformers because we lack a substantial and specific substitute for our present dilemma.

The country editor's low opinion of schoolteachers must unfortunately be the result of keen observation and discernment. It has been my experience, however, that in the eastern part of this country there exist many laudable attempts and some few successes in the field of education. But these cases are much too far apart in the intellectually barren wasteland. I share Mr. Richards's disgust for the dangerous and revolting insularity of most teachers. The government is gradually goose-stepping its way into the teaching system, exacting "points" that are purely numerical.

MARTHA F. LEYS.

Wynnewood, Penna.