

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

"Do We Know the Chinese?"

SIR: "Do We Know the Chinese?," by Witter Bynner [*SRL* Jan. 22], is an excellent article and has proven of special interest to Mrs. Andrews and the writer. In March 1917, at Vancouver, we sailed on the Canadian Pacific liner *Empress of Asia* for Hong Kong. Mr. Bynner was making his first trip to the Orient on this same sailing.

Not as appreciative then, as we are today, of Mr. Bynner's poetry and his obviously remarkable insight in the evaluation of peoples, we now confess that during the Pacific voyage he was known among the passengers as "Bitter Winter." This confession comes with due shame and regret and with this tardy apology to Mr. Bynner.

Compton Pakenham's boyhood experience in Japan reported in this article is also of special interest since the Konoye story of Japanese double morals was also told to the writer by Mr. Pakenham during the early recent war years. Further instances as well were related by the latter, which dealt quite as effectively with the double talk and double dealing of the Japanese—adding further proof of the accuracy of the conclusions drawn by Mr. Bynner in his splendid appraisal of Chinese versus Japanese character.

DON ANDREWS.

Fairhope, Ala.

Percy Scholes

SIR: In *SRL* Jan. 15 I was pained to see, in an otherwise interesting notice of Percy A. Scholes's recent book, "The Great Dr. Burney," that your reviewer refers to Dr. Scholes as "the late Percy Scholes."

Within the last three weeks my brother has exchanged letters with him, and there has been no announcement of his death in the meantime.

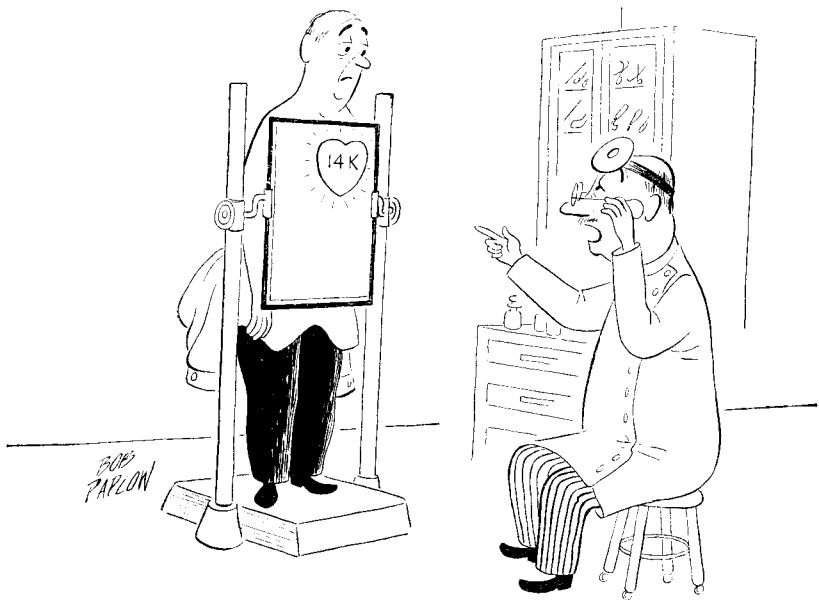
NELSON W. MCCOMBS.

New York, N. Y.

Multiple Sources

SIR: Much as I enjoyed Mr. Morley's review of Muriel Bowman's "Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales" [*SRL* Jan. 19], I cannot refrain from pointing out that his remark in the last paragraph about Kipling's having taken over his fine story "The King's Ankus" "straight from G. C." may be a little misleading.

Like most of the stories told by the Pilgrims, the "Pardoner's Tale" was a re-telling—with a difference. There are many analogues of this plot of double murder over a treasure from Oriental, Italian, and Germanic sources. An early version is found in the "Vedabbha Jataka" or "Birth Stories" of the Buddha. Since Kipling's story resembles the Hindu tale much more than it does Chaucer's, which is a closer parallel to a German one, it is reasonable to suppose that Kipling was indebted to folk



"I'm afraid this is a case for the Treasury Department—you've really got a heart of gold."

variants still current in India rather than to "G. C."

Incidentally, it was your own professor-critic-editor Henry Seidel Canby who called attention to the Kipling story as an analogue of the "Pardoner's Tale" in an article some years ago, and nominated it the best in prose, and indeed second only to Chaucer's poetic telling. This is the kind of thing that is occasionally brought out of hiding in "the hollow pumpkin of the graduate school."

ESTHER VINSON.

Normal, Ill.

A Realm of Gold

SIR: On Aug. 7, 1948, you published a confused and confusing review by Stuart Preston of "An Approach to Modern Painting," by Morris Davidson—modern painter, art teacher, writer of books in his field, whose fifteenth one-man show is now in progress at the Feigl Gallery. Preston, seeming to misconceive the author-artist's aim, reproaches him with "taking liberties with thirty centuries of art history," and enunciating "high sounding generalizations." This is hardly fair. Though his frame of cultural reference is wide, Davidson is not writing art history. His judgments, comments, and definitions have been wrung out of him by tough and serious contact with his age and his art. Though subjective, and controversial, sometimes, they are invariably searching and dynamic, often highly intellectual, and stir the reader to keen esthetic observation on his own.

To Davidson modern art is not something phony, capricious, or spewed up by the unconscious mind of the painter. It is a realm of gold, with deep roots in the past. His book, clear-cut and well organized, full of meat, offers the intelligent layman just what his title says—an approach,

a key to a kingdom of pure esthetic delight in which he can be a valuable guide. The illustrations are so brilliantly selected and lucidly explained and compared that the modern painter's secrets, aims, concepts, and derivations become something the layman can assimilate and apply to actual paintings—whether it be abstract, expressionistic, non-objective, or just Picasso or Piero de la Francesca.

ELIZABETH SHEPLEY SERGEANT.

Piermont, N. Y.

"Hobson's Choice"

SIR: Re Laura Z. Hobson's protest in behalf of all of us Double-Crostickers, who will soon be blind as bats if you don't rescue us [*SRL* Jan. 22]:

A faithful band (but highly irked)
We've patiently our puzzles worked
With none to care or ask if we
Survived this optic agony.

Calloo callay, likewise hooray!
We rebels see a dawning day
When each DCer, led by Laura,
Finds him free of this dim haura.

In grateful thanks I'll raise my voice
If given this NEW "Hobson's choice"!

WIN ECKHARDT.

Clayton, Mo.

SIR: . . . My only brickbat!

ADDIE W. LADD

Denver, Colo.

SIR: I do agree heartily . . . so much so that I pass up *The Saturday Review's* slick-paper DC's in favor of the kind that I buy in a book. [Her] letter does something for my ego

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also. Here I have been thinking that other SRL subscribers were so highly literate that they could do their DC's without resort to erasures!

MARY KATHARINE REELY.
Glen Lake, Minn.

SIR: I agree with Miss Hobson at least 100 per cent.

GEORGE ROBERTS.
West Hartford, Conn.

SIR: I cannot understand how an author of Miss Hobson's stature can be ignorant of the simple process any confirmed DCer knows must be followed in order to mark the semi-imperious surface of the back cover.

In the first place, the outer, or carborundum, veneer must be softened by soaking. I have found twenty-four hours in a hot solution of Sani Flush effective. Shake off the excess moisture, and while still damp it is possible with a Braille awl, to indent the desired letters in their proper places. When the sheet is completely dry rub the reverse, or embossed, side lightly with a dark pastel crayon; raw umber, or even black. When blown off, this leaves the raised characters in bold relief and by holding it before a mirror you may easily see what you have done. Errors are erased by simply reimmersing the sheet in hot water and starting all over.

Frankly, I am not wholly certain that the surface on which DC's are printed is not part and parcel of Mrs. Kingsley's fiendish ingenuity, calculated to add zest to the sport.

MRS. CARL R. GRAY III.
Sioux Falls, S.D.

EDITOR'S NOTE: We give in. DC's will soon appear on uncoated paper stock.

Genuine Foreign Policy

SIR: I agree with your recent editorial "The New Frontier" [SRL Jan. 1] that MacArthur's land program in Japan should have been followed in Greece. In fact I will go farther and say that if we had used the multibillions dumped into Europe and Asia to purchase the great estates for resale and businesslike distribution to the landless peasants we would have had such a dynamic and appealing program that Socialism and Communism would be rapidly disappearing as opposing ideologies, and America's democracy would have been hailed by the millions with such enthusiasm as to destroy all opposition. Then we would have a real, genuine foreign policy worthy of the name.

DONALD DESPAIN.
Chicago, Ill.

Bouquet from Britain

SIR: As a British publisher I should like to express the satisfaction which, week by week, SRL affords. Not only do you present such an interesting overall picture of current books, but your introductory comments to each section and your editorials make one feel that publishing and reviewing are not merely a business but a mission.

I suppose every publisher wonders at times whether his constant search

for the ideal book will ever be rewarded. If honest with himself, he must admit that the very necessity to publish—for he must keep the wheels turning—forces him to take on books which fall short of his ideal.

Perhaps that is one reason why SRL is always a tonic. You never fail to select books which, in your impartial judgment, are significant; and the fact that these are issued under so many imprints—of small as well as large and noted publishers—helps to maintain one's faith that some, at least, of one's own selections are as worth while as inner conviction affirms. The pity is that SRL has so few imitators. There is need for a similar treatment of a much larger number of books, in many countries, than is at present available.

Happily, in the case of America and Britain, so many books are now issued on both sides of the Atlantic that SRL is virtually an international periodical—another of its tonic aspects. Nothing confirms more clearly our fundamental unity of ideals than the fact that the aspirations of ordinary folk, as reflected in books, are so similar in essentials. That this is true also of the common man in other countries today, as shown by the translations you review, is very encouraging for the future of mankind.

JOHN BENN.
London, Eng.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Mr. Benn, a Princeton graduate and an author in his own right, is chairman of the board of Ernest Benn, Ltd., one of England's leading publishing houses.

The Bard, Again

SIR: I have been disappointed at the wild statements of various letter writers concerning Shakespeare. They all go back to prejudices or to opinion, although about 1900 a demonstration was made of a unique style in Shakespeare's plays and sonnets, independent of opinion.

I think the demonstration was made by Dr. Mendenhall, president of Worcester Polytechnic Institute, who devised what he called the style curve.

He found that most authors used a minor proportion of words one-letter long, a larger proportion of two-letter words, a maximum proportion of three-letter words, and a smaller proportion of four-letter words, and still smaller of longer words.

He found that Shakespeare used more four-letter words than three-letter words, differing widely from Bacon, for example, and from every other author thus analyzed.

As a matter of further interest, it may be stated that one English writer, and only one, used more two-letter words than three-letter words, and he, of all people, was John Stuart Mill, both in his "Political Economy" and in his autobiography.

Dr. Mendenhall published his results in the form of curves, saying that every play of Shakespeare conformed to this test of word length.

I have applied the test to many authors and find that Dr. Mendenhall's curves show all that he claimed.

EDWARD THOMAS.
New York, N. Y.

SIR: I started to use the dictionary in reading the letter by Gelett Burgess [SRL Feb. 5], and then reflected that I need not do that, for undoubtedly Burgess used one when he wrote it (or some time previous to that moment, according to Locke), and if he knows the meaning of "renitency," why should I bother to look it up?

Unlike the people mentioned in his letter, I don't accuse Mr. Burgess of anything but that one characteristic of many of America's would-be literary gentlemen, namely, lack of ability to please or to instruct. That is to say, just like many of the English professors who have ventured into print, from precious John Erskine right on down to Fiedler of Montana, he can parrot the English Augustan and Victorian and post-Victorian critics of English literature, but withal he has nothing intelligent to say.

These professors express and confirm year after year that fundamental characteristic of American society which the metropolitan universities and social groups propagate, i.e. hypocrisy. This trait is implicit in Mr. Burgess's letter in that iconoclasm is therein shown to be permitted only if the iconoclast has a previous degree in image-manufacture, and the icons to be broken are those who by Time and Destiny have become securely insured against breakage. Thus does SRL proudly permit Mr. Burgess to break his verbal shafts against the burly bust (1748-49) of William Shakespeare, well knowing that he can do no harm. But let anyone loose a shaft against the fakes of today! . . .

What a situation! Our men of learning, so-called, know nothing of action or of life in the real; and consequently cannot see through the fakes like Hemingway and Caldwell. On the other hand, our men of action know nothing of philosophy or learning; and there we are, with inarticulate do-ers, and ignorant-of-life (would-be) thinkers. So we allow the in-betweens, the just-missed-being-a-soldier-but-couldn't-stand-the-discipline - almost - finished - college school of writers like Steinbeck and Hemingway to pretend to speak for the men of action and teach the would-be thinkers about life.

We need a revolution in literature here in America! But not the kind that glorifies the dregs of society, or pretends to find intellectual interest in the struggle of Joe Blow to pro-



duce more steel per second than Rosie Rinkle. Discount those who write obviously to feed the obsolete taste of the stupid public; discount the asses who are trying to shock us with lies; ignore the insipidities of the ivory towerites; and try to build a new literature, a good literature, on the abilities of obviously honest, elegant writers, who if they have not had the opportunities of more fortunate people at least have the sincere faith in the thinking part of We the People.

Surely there must be those among America's younger writers who are completely disgusted with the pap which writers of the post-1900 period put out? How about forming a group of "Forward and Back to Real Literature" writers, none of whom is to be under twenty-five years, or an avant-garde writer, or an admirer of anything in contemporary American literature (since 1900) except works of Thomas Wolfe and Sinclair Lewis? (They also must have heard of the Pierian Spring!) Anyone interested, write me. I'm busy, so I won't guarantee to answer.

WILLIAM SMALL.

Rochester, N. Y.

Help Wanted

SIR: I'm trying to obtain some information about Alain Gerbault, the French adventurer, and the number of books he published about his travels in the boat *Firecrest* across the Atlantic and in the South Seas. Also whether there are any biographies about Gerbault published in this country.

JOSEPH KOTCKA.

609 Thompson Ave.
Clairton, Pa.

SIR: Though my book on Stephen Crane (1871-1900) for the American Men of Letters Series is nearly complete, there are still points of such difficulty that I should be grateful if any of your readers could help me with either documents (letters, photostats, or exact transcripts) or reminiscences (if possible, veracious) forwarded to the address below. Material will be returned at once.

JOHN BERRYMAN.

120 Prospect Ave.
Princeton, N. J.

SIR: Can any of your readers trace a missing volume of the diary of John Newton—the friend of William Cowper, Wilberforce, and Hannah More? It was in England a few years ago but may have been sold to an American collector or library. It is dated 1757-72.

BERNARD MARTIN.

Dellwood-Danbury-Essex, Eng.

SIR: I am writing the biography of the late Minnie Maddern Fiske, actress, and am desirous of seeing letters written by Mrs. Fiske, and letters and information concerning her.

Original letters entrusted to me will be carefully handled and returned promptly.

ARCHIE BINNS.

2120 Santa Cruz Ave.
Menlo Park, Calif.

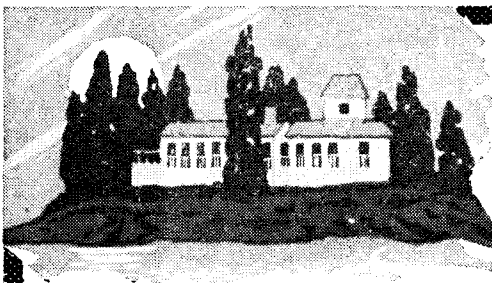


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Seeing Things

CONVERSATION PIECE

IN his course on Carlyle—a memorable one—Bliss Perry used to take off his glasses, hold them in his left hand, and lean forward on the desk as he told this story. Obviously, he relished it. Obviously, so did all his hearers at Harvard who had New England blood in their veins. It was only those of us who hailed from the loquacious South who found it uncomfortable, if not unbearable.

The yarn in question had to do with an evening—supposedly a wonderful, friendly evening—that Carlyle, not always a friendly man, once spent in Tennyson's company. As I recall it, the two men had descended to the kitchen after dinner, there to sit alone before the large open fire and smoke their pipes. How long they sat puffing away, each pursuing his own thoughts, I do not now remember. But I do know (this is what chilled the blood of Southerners as much as it warmed the hearts of Northerners) that they sat in *silence* for many blissful hours. In utter and undisturbed silence. When the time came for him to leave, Tennyson rose, emptied his pipe in the grate, and said to Carlyle (or was it the other way around?), "Thank you. I don't know when I have had such a happy evening."

To Bliss Perry this speechless communion was the finest proof of friendship imaginable. It was the ultimate compliment that each man could bestow on the other. It meant that the understanding between them was beyond the need of words. It implied a fellowship capable of finding pleasure in mere propinquity. It made silence eloquent.

As a person not ungiven to words, I could, and can, comprehend the point academically. But what even now I cannot understand is why Tennyson, Alfred Lord, should have bothered to leave his home that night and seek out the company of a friend if talk was what he wanted to avoid. Certainly, had such muteness been the ideal communication of all the articulate people from Socrates to Stalin, upon whom we eavesdrop in "The Book of Great Conversations"* (SRL Jan. 8), Louis Biancolli would have had no book. That is, of course, unless the voids created on page after

page by these golden silences were filled in by some such words as "Compliments of a Friend."

We would have lost much if Michelangelo; Rousseau; Voltaire; Dr. Johnson, that grand old bully with the language; Napoleon; Goethe; Hazlitt; Sainte-Beuve; Flaubert, Gautier, and those other wine-lit but sunbright minds that dined at Magny's; Walt Whitman and his birthday-greeters; Shaw; Chesterton; Wells; and even testy old Carlyle himself had always mistaken mum for the word. We would have lost much, too, if no one with a long memory or a good imagination and Boswellian inclinations had been on hand to write down what these men had said soon after they had said it. Yes, and ours would also have been a real loss had not Mr. Biancolli, with infinite patience and with true skill at setting the scene and characterizing his people, assembled from an incredible number of sources these fascinating records of meetings when tongues and minds were exercised and words flew. Among other things we would have lost a stimulating reminder of how different conversation is from talk.

All of us, who can, talk—even when we don't listen. And most of us talk too much. The impulse to talk is what strong men surrender to when they no longer have the strength to remain silent. What steam is to the kettle, talk is to the average mortal, the chief difference being that men and women do not have to come to the boil before releasing it. We talk out of loneliness, curiosity, or because of emotions, observations, or recollections which automatically well up into words. We talk to while away the time. We talk because our spirits demand constant ventilation. We talk because good talk is one of the most delicious of man's pleasures, and even poor talk is one of the most satisfying of his releases.

WE TALK for a thousand reasons. We talk to transact business, to find our way, to gain the importance that comes from being the first to carry bad tidings, to ferret out the news of our friends and tell them ours, to express sympathy or receive it, to advertise our operations, to salute the weather, to indulge in gossip, personal or political, or to repeat a joke. Mainly, however, we talk from the deep-seated, age-old human need to talk. That is one reason why some people, even when they are alone, can be heard mumbling away to themselves, sadly bereft of listeners but happily free therefore of the fear of interruption.

Yet much as we use our tongues, the mere fact that we keep them wagging does not mean that we often



—The Bettmann Archive.

Mme. de Staël holding court: "the pleasure [of interrupting] cannot exist in Germany."

*THE BOOK OF GREAT CONVERSATIONS. Edited by Louis Biancolli. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1948. 570 pp. \$5.