

the Phoenix Nest

NEW JERSEY SKYWAY

THIS level line of lamps I know:
An Ariadne thread of light
Stitching its way across the slow
Meadows into the lively night.

And I know also where it leads:
The multiple and morticed maze
Winking with motheye windowbeads
That waits on my reluctant days.

I know that labyrinth, and know
The squares and circles at its core,
And all the beasts that come and go—
All, all except the Minotaur.

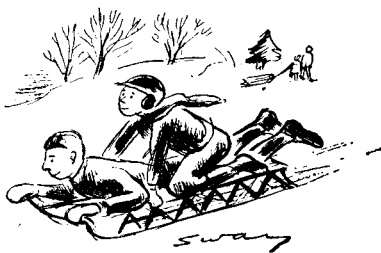
And in what shape, what nice disguise
Will he at last be manifest?
What pair of eyes will be his eyes,
Watching me, guessing and un-
guessed?

—JOAN AUCOURT.

* * *

As preface to the following I wish to say that I have never approved of the methods of the Thomas Committee in regard to the Communists in the United States. I believe, however, that the FBI has a perfect right to deal with any subversive activities of the Communist Party or of any other group or individual, and to make such activities the subject of fair court procedure. I agree with many things said by Richard O. Boyer in a pamphlet sent to me called "If This Be Treason" (New Century Publishers, 1948) concerning the misdoings of my country (a country to which my devotion is single because, for all its faults, it seems to me one of the most equitable places on earth), though I do not agree with him that any of these misdoings or all of them together would have made a Communist of me, as he says they did of him. He writes perfectly frankly, and quotes Emerson to the effect that one should not "speak with double tongue." I agree. I won't. I remember meeting Mr. Boyer when I was in the Independent Citizens Committee. I never knew then that he was a Communist, but I found him an agreeable man. He was not hiding from me that he was a Communist. It just never happened to come up. What annoys me slightly is the tone of his pamphlet, that tacitly assumes that anyone who isn't a Communist doesn't feel for Labor or the Negro, or any of the downtrodden and unfairly-treated, as the Communists do. And if every Communist examined by the Thomas

Committee, or any other committee or court, had spoken right out and said they were Communists and proud of it, I would have felt them to be more in the spirit of Mr. Boyer, or of Thomas Payne. Mr. Boyer says, among many other things, that former President Hoover did more to make him a Communist than Stalin; and the gist of his argument is that it was the horrors of the United States of America that made him a Communist rather than any Russian influence. I know something of the horrors of which he speaks, but I also know well the blessings of life in the United States as contrasted with the life of semi- or actual slavery of mind and spirit so prevalent in the Soviet Union. Yet the American Communist sees Russia as a land of milk and honey and America as a land of slavery and chains. Obviously, when people begin to talk that way, there is no chance for a reasonable exchange of opinion. Is there free speech in Russia? Vishinsky would contend that there is; but then his chief claim to fame has been decreeing mass deportation and death to non-Communists, and vilifying the United States in language never heard before in high places. Monopoly capitalism wields very dangerous and undemocratic power in the United States; but we have slave-labor to no such extent as in the concentration camps, for political and other prisoners, in the Soviet Union. We have not got, at a conservative estimate, fifteen million people wasting away their lives under intolerable labors, living worse than the beasts of the field, and dying in droves. If the triumph of Communism accomplishes such things as that, in a huge so-called Socialist country across the sea, is it reasonable to expect us to welcome the same system to America? Mr. Boyer need not come to the hasty conclusion that the American people are slaves or love tyranny. At present we have an Administration committed to reasonable reform and intelligent progress. Meanwhile the leaders of the Communist Party in



America are to stand fair trial to find out what they actually profess and would actually practise. And as to the word "treason," it has been a word invoked again and again and again in the Soviet Union against the slightest deviation from the Party Line. It was hugely present at the Moscow Trials, when men presumably strong babbled confessions of error in the most horrible abasement of the human spirit of which I ever read—in the official record of the State's own proceedings. I should rather have a rebel against *anything* go to his death with the bravado of the old highwaymen in England, than so humble himself before his hard-eyed human judges in a wallowing slaver of repentance! Torture can exact that. And a torture exceeding the torture of the broken body did so exact it. That was treason. and they made the most of it.

I have had a highly intelligent letter concerning my verses "To a Communist." The writer is an ex-Communist, and, I may say, a person of sterling character, who now remarks that Lenin's "Materialism" is "the world's most unreadable book." The present position, and in all probability the permanent one of this correspondent, is that Marxism is "philosophically nonsensical, logically unsound, historically arbitrary, and scientifically half false from the start and the other half overthrown by Einstein's first work." This writer feels that I have pointed out the real fallacies, in my verses. My correspondent speaks of the truly idealistic youngsters who some years ago threw themselves wholeheartedly into the Communist movement, in just that spirit, but seem in retrospect "just well-meaning, half-educated schlemihls." I have debated whether to publish the private unburdening of this correspondent, who incidentally lacks not at all in courage; but I think I can also quote this paragraph:

What brought us to the Party, whether we knew it or not, was the ethic of Christ: Love your neighbor as yourself. The Party's first act was to teach us that Marx recognized only the ethic of self-interest. If we ever convinced anybody of that, of course his self-interest took him straight to the Thomas Committee, to our rather naive surprise. But the more usual result was moral confusion—the end justifying the means, as you have pointed out, with its inevitable coarsening and corrupting effect on our characters. Our desire to teach others led to contempt of them, our sense of justice to self-righteousness, our love to hate. Most of us were absurdly gentle people physically, and yet I do not think any of us were fit to trust with power. The alternatives at last were: stay and be corrupted, or get out and repent.

However, this person's method of repentance was not like the enforced repentance of the Russian traitors to Communism! My correspondent simply walked out like a free American citizen and turned to other pursuits in no way connected with politics or with party issues: the best of which is happy family life in the country.

I stress the above because for a number of years there has grown in my heart a cold fear, as I saw many fine young people becoming absorbed in a doctrine that, to me, attacks the very foundations of intellectual freedom, and, indeed, "the foundations of human knowledge itself" (see the articles on official Soviet procedure by Joseph P. Lash in *The New Republic*). And yet I remain opposed to all the stupid vilifiers and misrepresenters as Communists of those who advocate needed reforms and social and economic justice!

I know much concerning the correspondent I quote, and nothing that is not good. I have read Lenin's own words, and some of his pronouncements have horrified me, while I sympathized utterly with his original fight against Czarist tyranny. I have read in Ben Gitlow's "The Whole of Their Lives" what contact with the Bolshevik leaders in Russia did to John Reed, whom I knew in our youthful days in New York and counted a friend and fellow poet. And what happened to Jack is not told in the words of Ben Gitlow but more terribly in the words of Jack's wife, Louise Bryant. "It is my strongest conviction," she said in grief, "he died because he did not want to live." I knew him as a laughing and high-hearted young radical, full to the brim of life and idealism, who staged the great IWW pageant in the old Madison Square Garden, and once came to me glowing with enthusiasm for G. K. Chesterton's "Ballad of the White Horse."

Certainly, today, the attitude of the Central Committee of the Soviet Union toward the scientist and artist strikes at the very root of all scientific and artistic integrity. The official smearing of all who do not agree with the rigid opinions of the small men who try to force science and art into a single groove would be preposterous if it were not so base. That is the result of dogma, pure and simple, made official and sacrosanct. Never on earth has the single-track mind been exalted in a fashion more destructive to the spirit of God within us, which is to speak the truth as we see it, and not as a parrot-lesson learned out of fear, devout ignorance, or an ulterior motive. Is this the age of a growing psittacism? It may prove so.

—WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT.

The Film Forum

FOR OBLIVION

The Saturday Review's Weekly Guide to Selected 16mm. Sound Films.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This week we take the unusual step of reviewing two films whose distribution has been forbidden in the U. S., "The Drug Addict" and its shorter theatre version, "Payoff in Pain." These highly responsible films, sponsored by Canada's Department of Health and Welfare, have been further approved by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, which supervised them technically, and by the Narcotics Division of the United Nations. They are already being screened throughout Canada. However, our own Treasury Department (Bureau of Narcotics) is reported to have asked that the films not be shown in the United States. Canada has, of course, acceded to this request.*

THE DRUG ADDICT

Produced by the National Film Board of Canada for the Department of Health and Welfare, Ottawa. (32 mins.)

PAYOFF IN PAIN

A condensed version of "The Drug Addict" produced by the Film Board for theatre distribution. (10 mins.)

Our era has seen the progressive lifting of many of the vetoes against general discussion of social issues. Yet in our society there exists one widespread evil about which we know almost nothing, though the signs of it are all around us: addiction to drugs. We hear of a famous movie actor being arrested for taking drugs the day before he is to address a meeting on juvenile delinquency. We read of marijuana "reefers" being sold to children only a few blocks away from their high-school doors. The papers report spectacular raids which net millions of dollars' worth of opium and heroin to the authorities.

But how does this traffic take place? How is distribution arranged? How do drugs reach the addicts under the eye of the police? And who are these addicts? Would one recognize them on the street? Where do they congregate? What kind of lives do they lead? What craving drives them on? And how does society treat those who may appear on the surface to be common criminals, but who are also pathetically sick men and women?

With swift, incisive strokes "The Drug Addict" asks and sketches in an answer to these and many other questions. Some of the roles in it are played by actual addicts who inject themselves with drugs (of course under medical supervision) before the eye of the camera itself. The audience watches with fascination the increasing nervous tension of an addict who knows that the crisis of his craving for the drug must be

alleviated two or three times a day. With trembling and yet expert movements he stabs his arm with the needle and throws himself on the bed of his squalid apartment where a kind of momentary nirvana spreads itself over his features. Everything in this man's life is sacrificed to his heroin. It will cost him upwards of \$10,000 a year to obtain it; to raise this money he must of course resort to crime.

Behind the addict we see all the machinery of distribution which his demands have built up: the big shot lolling in his magnificent convertible outside the town; the middleman furtively secreting his package of drugs in some downtown hiding place; the peddler skulking from block to block with the drugs hidden for security in a bag in his mouth; finally, the wretched addicts themselves, grouped at a street corner, harassed, anxious, waiting desperately for the moment which must be repeated with an equal desperation a few hours hence.

At each stage in this downward journey enormous profits are made. The opium which was bought in Bombay for \$50 fetches \$900 in a North American port and, passing through a network of agents, costs the addicts \$10,000. The addict himself is caught and imprisoned for the crimes he is forced to commit. But prison is only a temporary separation from the drug. When the addict goes back to society, he almost always goes back to the drug too. But now he is joined by youngsters who have listened in prison to the incessant conversation about drugs, and feel that for them too it can bring relief for their troubles.

All this the film dispassionately records in vivid sequences shot in the slums of Montreal. It is indeed an eye-witness film, and as such takes sides neither with the addict nor with the society which has produced him, though it appraises the necessary and excellent work of the law-enforcement squads. But when the police and the courts have done their work, the problem of the addict remains. What is society to do to him—or for him? There are the state-licensed drug supplies of certain European countries, the mental clinics pioneered in Kentucky.

These merely scratch the surface. An enlightened nationwide solution can be hammered out only by citizens and voters who know what the issues are. They have been allowed to see "The Snake Pit" with its condemnation of mental institutions. We urge that either "The Drug Addict" or its excellent condensed version, "Payoff in Pain," be released for public showing and receive widespread distribution in the theatres. Write THE FILM FORUM about this.

—RAYMOND SPOTTISWOODE.

For information about the purchase or rental of any films, please write to Film Department, The Saturday Review, 25 West 45th St., New York 19, N. Y.