

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WHAT'S FUN WORTH?

BRUCE CATTON's cautious affirmative answer to the question, "Is America Hospitable to Writers?" (SR Sept. 7), is, I believe, correct, but his article invites certain scholia. As, for instance:

For the decade 1924-1934, the period of his editorship of the *Mercury*, H. L. Mencken was at the top of his profession; among editors and critics he ranked pretty much as Andrew Mellon ranked among bankers, Elbert H. Gary among corporation lawyers, John J. Raskob among industrialists.

Mencken, always prudent financially, left an estate of some \$300,000. His whole accumulation was about equal to the annual income of a top-flight banker, lawyer, or manufacturer.

From this angle, America was hardly hospitable to this non-fiction writer.

But while he lived Mencken said exactly what he thought about every man, from President to plowboy, inclusive, and about everything from God to cockroaches, inclusive. Some would consider that freedom a bargain at \$200,000 a year.

And whenever Mencken raised hell, thousands of intelligent people laughed and cheered. Some would consider that worth another \$100,000 a year.

Large properties sometimes change hands for "one dollar and other valuable considerations," but everyone knows that they are paid for. Mencken could wear a good suit, eat a good dinner, smoke a good cigar, and drink a good brand of liquor; millionaires can do no more. So much for the dollar. Then in view of the other valuable considerations it can be argued with some plausibility that the critic's total compensation compared favorably with that of first-rate operators in other lines. He didn't get it in cash, but he took it out in trade.

Of course, no definitive answer is possible. It depends on the assessed valuation you put upon freedom, applause, and fun.

GERALD W. JOHNSON.

Baltimore, Md.

NO LITERARY LYNCHINGS

I READ "Is America Hospitable to Writers?" by Bruce Catton, three times, trying to see what he was gittin' at. It seems America is real hospitable to writers with original ideas.

They can't make a livin'.

A Publisher won't buy 'til he runs out of corn.

The Critics deal 'em a fit.

The Public won't read it 'cause it ain't what they just read.

And the Senate's got a carpet they're aholdin' onto, right ready to jerk it out from under if they git too loud.

I reckon what he means is, we ain't hanged one yet.

MARY WILLEFORD.

West Palm Beach, Fla.



HOW DO WE STAND?

N.C.'s EDITORIAL, "The Casual Approach to Violence" (SR Aug. 31), chimes in with something I am reading, and I would like to send you this quote from "History in a Changing World," by Geoffrey Barraclough.

What is obvious on the other hand, is that our civilization has seen a stupendous technical progress in all directions, quite without parallel in the past. No one would doubt that, at present, that is the most distinguishing feature of European civilization, and if you were to ask an Indian or a Chinese he would almost certainly pick it out immediately as characteristically European. But equally certainly he would add that we do not seem to be masters of our technical equipment, and he might also express grave doubts how far our technical progress had on balance really benefited mankind—particularly the peoples in Asia or Africa, on whom we had imposed it.

And there without doubt is the real problem. Bernard Shaw long ago pointed out that civilization is not simply a matter of the steam-engine and the electric telegraph—or (we might now add) of the jet-aeroplane and the hydrogen-bomb. What really matters is something far less tangible. It is the moral values a civilization expresses—if, indeed, it expresses any moral values at all—and its capacity for moral leadership. How does European [American] civilization stand in this respect? Have we the moral qualities essential for the proper use of our immense tech-

nical knowledge? This is the standard by which, in the end, our civilization will be judged, and it will matter less what it is than how it acquits itself.

Mrs. R. G. LEVAN.

East Chicago, Ind.

LIVELY, LOUD CORPSE

WILLIAM BITTNER's statement ("William Carlos Williams: Muse or Patron Saint," SR Sept. 7) that "the practice of reading [poetry] aloud, in spite of the lift it got from the magnificent voice of Dylan Thomas, has nearly died out" is open to question. Surely the appearance of a sizable index of spoken poetry on records and tapes issued this year by the American Library Association is evidence to the contrary. And for the first time in its history Ravinia Park (Chicago) included in this year's summer programs a poet—Archibald MacLeish—reading his own works. Likewise, a full house sat for more than an hour to hear Cecil Day Lewis read his poems this past May at the University of Colorado. Last September, Denver poet Thomas Hornsby Ferril read his "Words for Time" at the famous Red Rocks Amphitheatre. Reading poetry aloud is a regular occurrence in San Francisco, where for years poets of that area have been reading their verse to jazz accompaniment. This fall Palo Alto poet Kenneth Patchen plans a poetry-jazzband tour of the Midwest. Nearly died out? Hardly.


Mrs. JUDITH E. WRAY.

Littleton, Colo.

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MOTION-PICTURE acting, as everyone must know by now, is a work of bits and pieces. An expression now, a reaction then, a few words spoken, and time out while a new camera position is set up —so the job of building a performance proceeds day by day. No wonder so many dull, unconvincing performances turn up in movies. Some of the most competent people are defeated by the procedure. And no wonder so many so-called stars regard their principal work as publicity and not as acting. Even when a brilliant newcomer like Carroll Baker creates an unforgettable "Baby Doll," the knowing public has doubts: was it Miss Baker only, or did the redoubtable Elia Kazan do a good deal of the manipulating? This is meant by way of reservation before greeting with enthusiasm the acting of Joanne Woodward in "The Three Faces of Eve." The role, that of the unhappy case history of a young Southern woman who seemed to have three distinct personalities, allows Miss Woodward to achieve something of a *tour de force*; it also allows her to be genuinely touching.

With a mere glint of the eye and a hint of wickedness in a smile she transforms herself from the drab, spiritless housewife who has been suffering from splitting headaches and "blackouts" into a sexy, carefree hoyden, with only scorn for poor Eve White and a frank detestation for Eve's clod of a husband—played by David Wayne with a good deal less sympathy than Miss Woodward gives her three mixed-up selves. The third self, the normal one, must have been the hardest of all to do, and yet she makes "Jane" touching, too—in spite of a faint wonder why Jane, who grew up in the South along with Eve White and Eve Black, doesn't have a Southern accent.

Psychiatric as the subject-matter is, Nunnally Johnson, who both directed and wrote the picture, has kept the clinical material to a minimum, and concentrated on the woman's plight. There is, also, surprisingly, some humor and irony. The caustic performance by Wayne sometimes creates an unexpected laugh, and Lee J. Cobb is just right as the psychiatrist who has to cope with three women in one body. Alistair Cooke intones an introduction, so we'll all be properly aware that the picture is being sent

our way as a public service, and then Miss Woodward takes over. As far as *she's* concerned it's valid dramatic material, and strangely enough, she makes it so.

* * *

Warner Brothers has seen to it that we have the chance to view Yvonne Mitchell's performance in "Woman in a Dressing Gown," a British-made picture that gathered in some awards at a recent Berlin film festival. Miss Mitchell plays what I hope is not a typical middle-class British housewife utterly unable to keep the flat in shape, the dishes washed, the clothes ironed, and her husband content. The years have made her cheerfully drab and defeated by the tasks of being a housewife and mother, and eventually the husband (Anthony Quayle) strays to his young, neat, bright, charming, beautiful secretary who, for some reason, sees this domesticated beaten-down middle-aged man as the man of her dreams. Faced with a marital break-up, Miss Mitchell marshals her pitifully inadequate forces, and proceeds to win the day, meanwhile getting the chance to go through some dramatic scenes of the type that lady actresses cry for. If the triangle is familiar, Miss Mitchell's work gives it interest. But sometimes she is not consciously funny. She's just too hopeless.

—HOLLIS ALPERT.

LONDON (BY CABLE).
HOLLYWOOD'S angry man, Charles Chaplin, chooses to call himself King Shahdov in his newest film, "A King in New York." The key to the picture both from Chaplin's standpoint and from the audience's may very well lie in that name. He would seem to be saying that America is a land of shadows. But, unfortunately, the picture shows up only a shadow of Chaplin's genius. As a satire of America it has moments of great comedy, but these moments are inserted between many long, dull nothing-happens scenes. Some Americans will be irked by the denunciations of American Red-hunting. But that is not the point. After all, some of our Washington Red-hunters have laid themselves open to comic baiting. The trouble is that Chaplin in this film is not funny enough and not often enough. In a previous satiric film, "The Dictator," Chaplin proved that he could be satiric and bitter as