

Saturday Review

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Masked Shrikes and Angry Penguins

HAS anyone noted the recent epidemic of elaborate hoaxes here and abroad? The bird watchers of Britain, for instance, are currently emitting shrill cries of dismay over the news that hoaxers have been at work in their midst for decades. Ever since the turn of the century British bird fanciers have been thrilled, if a touch dazed, by the frequency with which birds normally rare in Britain have been shot down in the foothills near Hastings, Sussex. The hunters' busy guns have regularly felled such off-beat species as the Dartford warbler, the slender-billed curlew, the gray-rumped sandpiper, and the masked shrike. Offered for sale, these *rarae aves* have been snapped up by museums and private collectors at prices often exceeding fifty pounds.

It now develops, however, that there has been mischief afoot. Several weeks ago a group of noted ornithologists charged flatly that all these years someone has been "salting" the Hastings foothills with birds shot elsewhere in the world and shipped to Sussex packed in ice. No names are mentioned in the birdmen's report, but the finger points to a Hastings taxidermist, now deceased, whose fowling piece had a peculiar and profitable affinity for the rare birds. The charges of jiggy-pokery are still being argued, but the case has already put Britain's millions of bird watchers in something of a flap.

Meanwhile, the bird watchers' music-loving cousins have been reverberating like tuning forks over *their* encounters with the hoaxing mentality. Early last year handbills and advertisements an-

nounced the first London concert of "the famed Hungarian pianist Maestro Tomas Blod." Nothing loath, more than a hundred aficionados paid 35 cents each for an evening of "Surrealism in Music" at Wigmore Hall.

As his audience sat entranced, the maestro gave a bravura performance at the keyboard. The result was an impressive display of kinesics, but no outpouring of sound, since the piano's keys had been disconnected from the strings. After a noiseless, hour-long performance, the maestro took his bows to dutiful applause, and departed.

Later it turned out that he was actually a Cambridge antique-shop owner with a Hungarian accent and a strong desire to ridicule the "phoniness" of certain modern musicians and artists and their coteries. "I wanted," he told reporters, "to see how far we could go with something completely ridiculous. . . . But they applauded! The self-discipline of the English is the absolute end. . . . One couple actually came up and told me how much they'd enjoyed my concert because it was so quiet."

Catching the fever, the British Broadcasting Company soon afterward presented on its highbrow Third Programme "The avant-garde work 'Mobile for Tape and Percussion,' by the Polish composer Piotr Zak, one of the youngest and most controversial figures in modern music." Broadcast with official BBC approval, the program was described thus by various company spokesmen: "We dragged together all the instruments we could and went around the studio banging them. . . . It

was an experiment to demonstrate that some contemporary compositions are so obscure as to be indistinguishable from tapes of percussion played at random. . . . It was a serious hoax to set people thinking. . . ."

As a cautionary leg-pull, the BBC broadcast was remindful of the immortal *Angry Penguins* hoax of the mid-Forties. In 1944, two Australian Army soldiers, weary of "the gradual decay of meaning and craftsmanship in poetry," decided to expose an avant-garde Australian poetry magazine called *Angry Penguins*. In one feverish afternoon, the pranksters invented a modern poet, "Ern Malley," and provided him with a body of work—a horrendous collage of words and phrases put together at random from such sources as a U.S. government report on sewage-disposal techniques. Inevitably, *Angry Penguins* bit hard, printed Malley's work, and acclaimed him as "one of the two giants of contemporary Australian poetry." When the hoax was revealed, the scandal and laughter forced the magazine out of business.

For better or worse, the urge to shake up people's coals through hoaxes seems to be spreading. Only last winter Broadway producer David Merrick, irritated by the indifferent notices given one of his plays, struck back by means of a hoax. One morning he ran in a New York paper a full-page advertisement containing glowing endorsements of his play by "Walter Kerr," "Richard Watts," and five other leading critics. The headline of the ad screamed: 7 OUT OF 7 ARE ECSTATICALLY UNANIMOUS ABOUT "SUBWAYS ARE FOR SLEEPING." The catch was, of course, that Mr. Merrick had persuaded various Manhattan residents, none of them critics, to lend him their homonyms for the occasion.

ALTOGETHER, it seems clear that the hoaxers are coming into their own as serio-comic social critics. This possibility has, in fact, been foreseen by such students of the hoax as Professor Curtis D. MacDougall, author of the engaging, exhaustive work "Hoaxes," which is now available in paperback. Another interpreter of the hoax as a significant phenomenon is Gilbert Highet. In a perceptive essay in *Horizon*, Professor Highet implies that the way nations react to major hoaxes is an index of their flexibility and survival potential. The nation that is too rigid to laugh at a hoax and profit by its revelations is, he feels, headed for trouble.

If this is so, Americans had better resign themselves to taking a chins-up attitude toward the coming wave of space-age pranks and japes; for it looks as if the hoaxers will be active among us for some time to come.

—HALLOWELL BOWSER.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SAVE THE CHILDREN

FRANK FREMONT-SMITH, in his editorial "Saving the Children Can Save Us" [SR, Aug. 11], has hit the nail precisely where a nail should be hit. Those of us who care about mankind in terms of what might happen to those we love—and who does not belong to this grouping?—must strive with all our mights, separate and individual, to turn the tide of thinking back to the fundamentals of life. There are those who may not much care what happens to Ivan Ivanovich and his Pyotrs, Sashas, and Mashas, but let it never be forgotten that whatever may happen to them may well happen also to our own golden-haired, bright-eyed Johnnies, Marys, Janes, and Josephs. The lights of our own eyes are not one particle more immune to the weapons of war that men wield today than are the children of the "barbarians."

PAULA FILPUS GOLICK.

Bethesda, Md.

I REGRET TO HAVE TO QUESTION Mr. Frank Fremont-Smith's futile suggestion for "bridges across the great chasm which separates East from West." For, his so-called "common denominator for all mankind," that of "protecting the children" with a reciprocal agreement between Russia and the United States, is but an agreement.

I suggest another plan—that Russia and the United States exchange one million school children, from the eighth through the eleventh grades, for study in the large urban centers of Russia and the United States. Of course, this would be a big undertaking, but the shipment of armies, supplies, etc., is a big undertaking, too. These "islands of friendly hostages," would constitute something more than an agreement.

MARTIN PAUL KUEHN.

Chicago, Ill.

... AND WHAT MAKES the author think or even suppose that this small sentiment might sway the emotions of any leader in a totalitarian state?

MRS. G. UPTON.

Los Angeles, Calif.

I DO NOT BELIEVE there is a stronger mutual interest between the races of man than concern for children. This conviction comes out of my experiences as a public health nurse and as an investigator in health and nursing surveys—work that took me into the homes of people of a great variety of races and cultures in our own country. Though some of these homes were the tarpaper cabins of homesteaders, and some were the hovels of itinerant fruit pickers, others represented a considerably higher standards of living.

Not once was a door closed against me; the welcome was always there, for I had come to talk about the baby and the other small children. If I wished to gain entrée



"Don't try to reason with me!"

to the homes of people of all races and cultures over the world, I'd try to learn just four words in each language—"How is the baby?"

JANET M. GEISTER.

Chicago, Ill.

SPUR TO POPULATION

SANSKRIT CLASSICS like the "Kama Sutra" [SR, Aug. 25] do not help to stem the population explosion in India or elsewhere.

FREDERICK HOELZEL.

Chicago, Ill.

PROBLEM TRANSFERRED

AFTER READING that tale on the Pen Pal in the PHOENIX NEST [SR, Aug. 18], it takes even less than a package of frozen whole kernel corn to set me off. In fact, I can no longer go to the refrigerator to make a martini without thinking of that poor boy in the Darlington Training School.

This Mr. Jacobs should not be so complacent as to think he has solved a problem. He has done nothing of the sort; he has just dumped it in my lap.

HOWARD HUSH.

Grosse Pointe Woods, Mich.

ADULTS, PLEASE!

IN ROBERT LEWIS SHAYON's column on the "Shelley Berman Show" [SR, Aug. 11], he gives further currency to a view which, though commonly held, I find suspect. "It is alleged," he says, "that children dominate the TV channel selectors."

However, the only study I have seen on the subject directly contradicts the

proposition that children dominate TV tuning. It was a correlation analysis of Nielsen audience ratings and TV/Q preference scores by half-hours during Prime Time (7:30-11:00 P.M.). It showed that adults have their program preferences tuned in far more than do children. Among the adults, apparently age group thirty-five to forty-nine was the one most able to watch what it likes, while children and teen-agers (six to seventeen) were least likely of all age divisions to have their program preferences tuned in.

Lacking strong evidence that the study is not true, those interested in the health of TV entertainment, it seems to me, should not suggest that children are the sole or chief substance of program rating success.

STANLEY J. QUINN, JR.

Darien, Conn.

TWO YEARS MISSING

I WOULD LIKE to correct in my review of "The Polish Mind," by M. Kuncewicz [SR, Aug. 4], one misprint which degenerated into a factual error: the novelist Hlasko left Poland in 1958, not in 1960, as it was printed.

WIKTOR WEINTRAUB.

Cambridge, Mass.

WRONG BOOK?

SIDNEY HARRIS did not review [SR, Aug. 11] "The Uses of Ineptitude," by Nicholas Samstag. He reviewed a book that has not yet been written. Samstag's book is witty, pertinent, courageous. When will you review it?

LESLIE BRANDOCK.

New York, N.Y.