

PHILIP RAHV

THE LITERARY CLASS WAR

In the capitalist countries proletarian literature has as yet not reached adulthood, its most active forces being at present chiefly engaged in breaking ground for the sowing of the vital seed of Marxism. From the October Revolution it received a tremendous impetus, yet it is only with the late onrush of economic catastrophe throughout the world that it began moving towards a determined extirpation of all liberal, reformistic elements within itself. Tearing asunder the last vestigial piece of bourgeois-esthete fancy-drapery, it proclaimed its position to be that of irreconcilable class-antagonism. True, a literature of social protest against capitalism has always existed, but being based on the premisses of Idealism—in the main without any overt awareness of its resultant anti-Marxist orientation—it failed to formulate a clear dialectico-materialistic world-view. Consequently such expression can be placed under the category of proletarian literature only when that concept is apprehended in extremely general terms.

The urgent task of the Marxist critic today is manifest. He must carve out a road for the proletarian writer, who, living as he does under the constant pressure of the prevailing ideas derived from the property-relationships of existing society, is faced with immense obstacles in his struggle to liberate himself from various bourgeois preconceptions which he still unconsciously adheres to. It is the critic's task to indicate how the dynamics of dialectic materialism can vitalize the new proletarian expression, and what form their integration into the warp and woof of this expression should take. A more definite frontier between the proletarian and the bourgeois in letters should be established. This of course, necessitates a thorough critical scrutiny of bourgeois trends in this field; just as every discussion of socialism implies a corresponding discussion of capitalism, so every discussion of proletarian literature implies a corresponding discussion of bourgeois literature; the latter is the thesis, the former the antithesis, and it is the classless society of the future that will ultimately resolve the contradiction between the two by creating the economic basis for a new superstructural equilibrium.

Recognizing its present developmental stage as elementary, the critic who attempts to build a theoretical scaffolding for proletarian literature can but partially base his argument on what is actually being produced in capitalist countries at the present time. A theoretical formulation *wholly* based on actual proletarian practice would run contrary to dialectic because it would largely ignore the dynamic mobility of class-consciousness; hence, in writing of proletarian literature, the Marxist critic has his eye on the future as well as on the present, and the authenticity of his analysis cannot be invalidated by the examination of his statements in the light of present-day facts alone.

The Idea of Katharsis Revitalized:

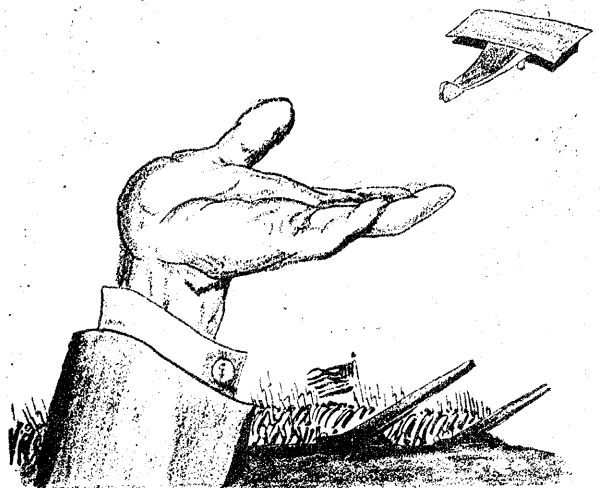
The Greek idea of katharsis in art is one of the most fertile conceptions ever devised. However, its classic formulation by Aristotle as a process effecting a proper purgation of the emotions through pity and terror, is a static, passive conception quite in line with the needs of a slave-owning class endowed with cultural tastes and appreciative of the great art of tragedy, but unwilling to permit the even tenor of its parasitic existence to be disturbed by gruesome realities. Thus the "significant change" effected in the reader or spectator by the katharsis leaves him limp and reconciled to the "immutable laws of life." After the grand spectacle of a Sophoclean tragedy, the Greek gentleman went home to his slaves, stimulated indeed, but resigned to the whims of the gods and "human nature." This form of katharsis is merely a sort of transcendental mental laxative for a cultured leisure class.

Nevertheless, a consistent examination of the qualitative properties of artistic creation leaves one with the conviction that without katharsis that creation loses all significance, loses that high gravity which is the most characteristic function of art. Within proletarian literature one can discern the implicit form of a new katharsis, likewise a purgation of the emotions, a cleansing, but

altogether of a different genus: *a cleansing through fire*. Applying the dynamic viewpoint of dialectics, a synthesizing third factor is added to the Aristotelean pity and terror—and that is militancy, combativeness. The proletarian katharsis is a release through action—something diametrically opposed to the philosophical resignation of the older idea. Audaciously breaking through the wall that separates literature from life, it impels the reader to a course of action, of militant struggle; it objectifies art to such a degree that it becomes instrumental in aiding to change the world. A proletarian drama, for instance, inspires the spectator with pity as he identifies himself with the characters on the stage; he is terror-stricken by the horror of workers' existence under capitalism; but these two emotions finally fused in the white heat of battle into a revolutionary deed, with the weapon of proletarian class-will in the hands of the masses. This is the vital katharsis by means of which the proletarian writer fecundates his art.

The impotence of bourgeois literature is best evidenced by the utter lack of katharsis within it; it is no longer capable of its traditional static signification. In its place it substitutes disgust, or simply a series of shocks attendant upon the exhibition of various *naturalia*. The literature of the bourgeoisie when it was still a revolutionary class in society, was still capable of katharsis. Now, however, in its stage of decline and imminent collapse, the signification of katharsis is manifestly impossible, for the reason that the class of which this literature is a reflection has already lost all belief in itself. Thus the novels of a writer like William Faulkner leave the reader with nothing; it is merely stylized photography, the same old treadmill of naturalism, with the wheels going around a little faster—in the thickening twilight.

Commenting on Dreiser's *American Tragedy*, Irving Babbitt writes: "He has succeeded in producing in this work something genuinely harrowing; but one is harrowed to no purpose. One has more than the full measure of tragic qualm but without the final relief and enlargement of spirit that true tragedy succeeds



Dan Rico

somehow in giving, and that without resort to explicit moralizing. It is hardly worth while to struggle through eight hundred very pedestrian pages to be left at the end with a feeling of sheer oppression." Quite true. But of course such a confirmed Brahmin and arch-defender of the status quo as Prof. Babbitt cannot be expected to think anything out to its logical conclusion. The Back Bay aristocracy does not believe in thinking things out to their logical conclusions. From Babbitt's idealistic postulates (this gentleman considers Nature as a philosopher in pursuit of an "inner check"—for the workers of course; the greed of capitalism knows no check save the organized might of the exploited masses) it follows that if Dreiser has only wished he could have signified his material; hence the bald accusation of deliberate willfulness. The fact is, however, that no katharsis can be effected by a writer who is not consciously up in arms against capitalism, who does not visualize the free, rational society of the future. When he wrote *The American Tragedy*, Dreiser was still in his phase of darkest pessimism, reducing life-phenomena to "physico-chemical terms;" this point of view is just as much a reflection of bourgeois collapse as the philosophy of Spengler, despite the fact that even then Dreiser was already pointing to the monothestic spirit of capitalism as the determining factor in the stultification of American life—but lacking the dialectic revolutionary solution, he was incapable of handling his material in any other way than the way he did. Literature is the integration of experience, but experience cannot be integrated when the human signification is lacking; and *capitalism and human signification don't mix*. Proletarian literature, on the other hand, supplies that want with its own form of katharsis. Every instance of a class-unconscious worker gaining class-consciousness is katharsis, every strike, every militant action, every aggression on the part of the proletariat is katharsis. Proletarian literature is replete with human signification.

In defining tragedy (and this definition is generally applicable to all works of art) Aristotle stated: "It is an action that is complete and whole, and of a certain magnitude; for there may be a whole that is wanting in magnitude." Here too we notice the constitutional weakness of bourgeois literature and the foundational conformity of proletarian literature to the classic conception of what an effective literary work should be, of course with the important modifications concomitant with the changes in economy. Joyce's *Ulysses*, for example, is marked with a certain magnitude, but only in a negative sense. It is the magnitude of death, not of life. As to the criterion of an organic whole, there is no question that it does not exist. Mrs. Bloom's long mental orgasm is quite a proper ending for such a bourgeois labyrinth as *Ulysses*. It has neither a beginning nor an end. It jumps at life like a cat at a canary, but the housewife arrives in the nick of time, and the disgruntled cat jumps out of the window and slinks down to the dungheap behind the gashouse by the bank of a slimy river, where it sinks into a fetid dream. In direct contrast to these graveyard antics, proletarian literature, by linking up the individual with the collective, achieves that genuine magnitude which follows the Marxian comprehension of the historical process as a whole.

The Highest Degree of Consciousness

The prime-phenomenon of Marxism is intense consciousness—the highest degree of social consciousness as yet attained by man. Proletarian literature, partaking of this quality, should also be tested by this touchstone. However, a literature that is a rancid hotchpotch of mystic subjective introvert speculation, arbitrary and hallucinatory, is much better suited to capitalist class purposes than one that is animated by a high degree of consciousness. The proletariat is the most advanced class in society, the class destined to bring about the survival and the further development of western culture, and since consciousness points the way to the inexorable march of this class to power, it constitutes in itself the high secret of the proletarian advance. Not so the bourgeoisie; to it consciousness, which the objective circumstances inevitably focus on the class struggle as the dominant aggregate in the social constellation, would be widely pernicious; it is the dynamite that could blow up its most cherished illusions. Consequently bourgeois literature takes refuge in a flight from consciousness, it finds a haven in the subconscious. Thus the Revolution of the Word can be explained from a Marxian standpoint. The bourgeois ideologue would like to think that they too are revolutionists, so the word-game is initiated, and we are treated to the ludicrous spectacle of grown-up people indulging in the most fatuous and

infantile delusions. These experiments with word-dismembering are of no more value than the well-known experiments of children with flies, yet the bourgeois illuminati take these word-revolutionists quite seriously. In the ultimate analysis the Revolution of the Word is a pretext for indulging in psychopathological orgies; it represents a deep-seated craving for the prenatal stage, for non-being. The vagaries of Jolas & Co. and the necromantic method of producing literature through the immaculate conception of automatic writing are quite proper end-phenomena of a dying class, and of a crumbling hegemony.

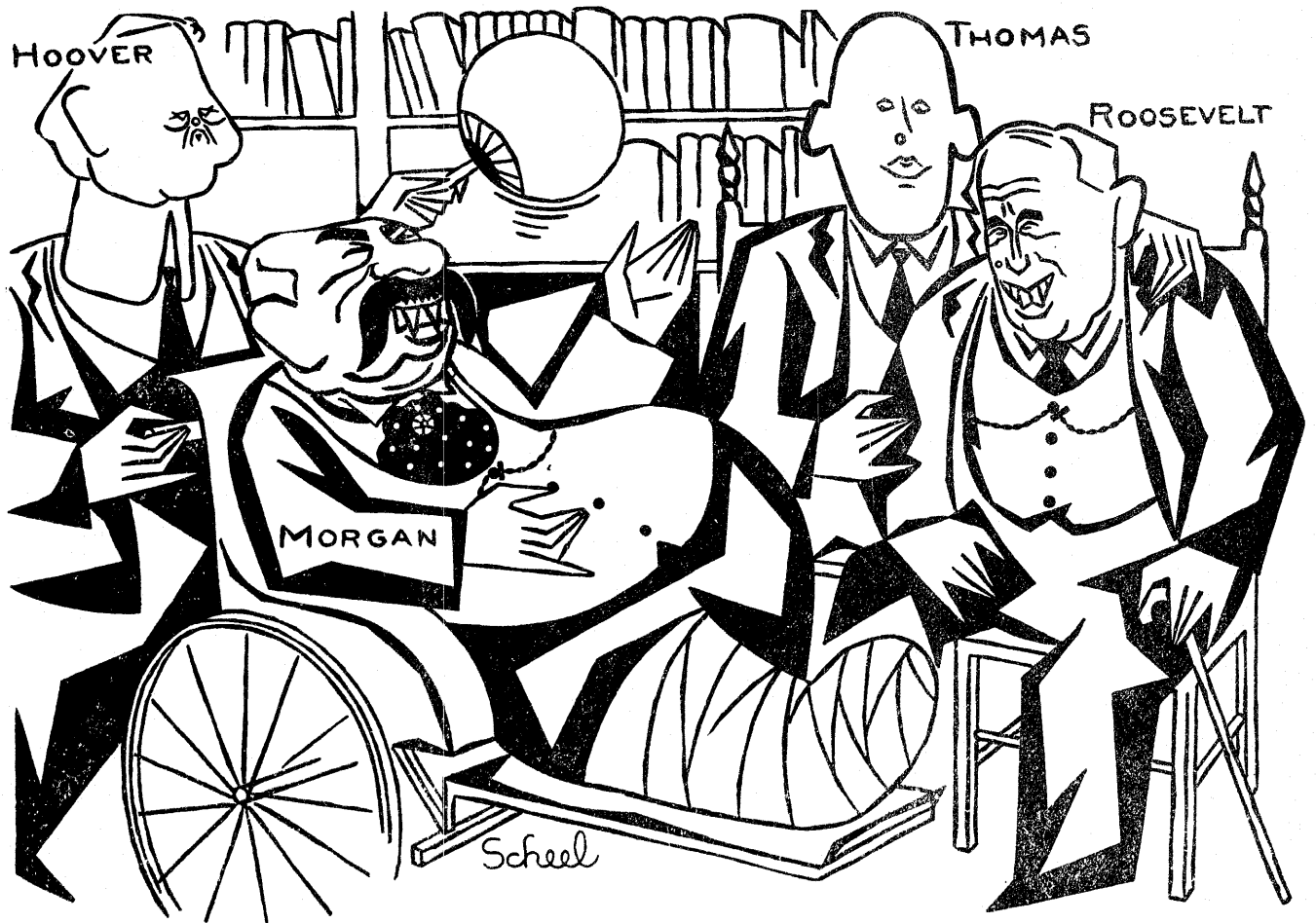
Antithetical Psychologies:

The psychology of the proletariat is in the very nature of its class existence a psychology of production, the psychology of makers, of creators. It is a healthy psychology, in profound harmony with the rhythms of nature. After a rapid process of development we observe in the bourgeoisie of the post-war epoch the emergence of a psychology of pure consumption—particularly in America (in Europe this psychology gained ascendancy much earlier). Here we perceive how a change in the form of the property-relationships—the transition from industrial to finance capitalism—conditions the psychology of a class. Finance capitalism creates a financial aristocracy, whose psychology is that of coupon-cutters, of *rentiers*, of people totally removed from the economic life.

In his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, N. I. Bukharin gives an illuminating portrayal of the role which this stratum of the bourgeoisie plays in society: "We have already seen," he writes, "that the class of society here discussed is a product of the decline of the bourgeoisie. This decline is closely connected with the fact that the bourgeoisie has already lost its functions of social utility. This peculiar position of the class within the production process, or, to put it more correctly, without the production process, has led to the rise of a peculiar social type that is characterized particularly by its asociality. While the bourgeoisie as such is individualistic from its very cradle . . . the individualism in the case of the *rentier* becomes more and more pronounced . . . There disappears not only the interest in capitalist enterprise but any interest in the social altogether. The ideology of a stratum of this type is necessarily strongly individualistic. This individualism expresses itself with peculiar sharpness in the esthetics of this class; *any treatment of social themes appear to it eo ipso as 'inartistic,' 'coarse,' 'tendencious'*" (italics mine—P.R.)

In analyzing the bourgeoisie of his time, the American economist Thorstein Veblen concluded that theirs was a psychology of "conspicuous consumption." American critics of the left have been strongly influenced by this thesis, which is undoubtedly true of the American bourgeoisie of Veblen's time. For the present, however, I think his thesis is no longer valid. The psychology of conspicuous consumption is chiefly characteristic of the bourgeois in his prime phase, when he is still an entrepreneur; but with the transition to finance capitalism the industrial bourgeoisie, the entrepreneurs, begins to play a minor role in shaping the ideology of the class; the industrial bourgeoisie now forms the *substratum* of the capitalist class, and generally tries to ape the life-pattern of the upper stratum, the coupon-cutters. The vogue which pseudo-aristocratic manners and ideas begin to enjoy during this phase is extremely symptomatic of this shift; in short, the old straightforward vulgarity of the brutal slave-driver in direct personal control of the instruments of production is now replaced by the sophisticated vulgarity of idlers and poseurs.

In the realm of superstructure this evolution wields of course a powerful influence in determining the metamorphosis of literary ideology, both in the sphere of form and in the sphere of content. The heroes of Frank Norris' novels of industrial life are captains of industry, alive and buoyant with the optimism and vigor of a class still relatively young; they are in constant touch with the actual process of production; they are not coupon-cutters. This is no longer true of the literature produced during the period of finance capitalism. The present asociality, blind anarchic individualism, amorality, are all essential factors of the new ideology, which in its own right comprises one of those internal contradictions of capitalism that operate for its destruction. Consider this statement by T. S. Eliot: "The arts insist that a man shall dispose of all that he has, even of his family tree, and follow art alone. For they require that a man be not a member of a family or o



"GENTLEMEN, I FEEL BETTER ALREADY!"

Scheel

a caste or of a party or of a coterie, but simply and solely himself . . ." This statement offers us a concentrated expression of the asocial psychology of pure consumption. Herein we see how the cultural representatives of the bourgeoisie irresistibly gravitate towards a complete acceptance of the ideology of that section of the dominating class which is furthest advanced on the road to extinction.

In American literature the transition from the psychology of conspicuous consumption to that of pure consumption took place during the twenties. H. L. Mencken concretely exemplifies this change. The ferocious warfare he waged against democracy, his extreme individualism, his organic inability to think in socio-economic terms—all are indications of the change. Sinclair Lewis militated against the "standardized philistinism" of George F. Babbitt and helped to bring about the individualistic philistinism of the people in *The Sun Also Rises*. George F. Babbitt is a regimented bourgeois, a garrulous booster, social with the hypocritical society of industrial capitalism; the protagonists in Hemingway's novel are effete hypochondriacs, cataleptic individualists—the human dust of finance capitalism. The writers of the early twenties fought for sophistication, i.e., for individualistic philistinism. (The Babbitts of the era of pure consumption are generally known as sophisticates.) Booth Tarkington could still describe the plutocrat with relish, with a certain amount of health, but the writers of the late twenties and the thirties, never. To them the plutocrat is a coarse animal; only when he spends his holidays in Southern France, patronizes the arts, and under the influence of numerous cocktails becomes capable of philosophic discourses on life, death, and the immortal soul is he worthy of respect.

Even in the commercial trash dumped by the tons on the market this transition is patent. In the thousands of novels turned out annually the heroes and heroines seem to exist in an economic

vacuum—they all have money, they are all dressed up in the height of fashion, they are present at all the smart events—but where and how they amassed their fortunes is not mentioned. The assumption is that their fathers or grandfathers did well by their children, but this is not allowed to intrude into the texture of the novel.

In England the arrival of the historic moment of pure consumption for the bourgeoisie occurred much earlier, and aided by the nobility and other atavistic feudal elements its assimilation into ideology was quickly effected. Aldous Huxley typifies in himself the position of a writer who has accepted this psychology *in toto*. The characters in his novels, psychic louts most of them, are constantly peregrinating from one country-house to another, forever talking, but under no circumstances concerned with productive work. In *Antic Hay* one of them, a female adventurer, is reclining on a couch and meditating in this profound fashion: "We on the sofas, ruthless, lovely and fastidious." Huxley was ironizing in this passage, but unconsciously he was formulating his own class-position. On the sofa, febrile, inept, entangled in intellectual cobwebs, yet deeming himself exceedingly ruthless, and of course so esthetic (lovely) and sophisticated (fastidious). Nobody works except the lower classes (the servants). Mr. Huxley and his intellectual companions are all coupon-cutters, hence it is not hard to understand why he wrote *Brave New World*. The civilization of the coupon-cutters is in jeopardy, the Nirvana of pure consumption is threatened, and Mr. Huxley, like the good ideologue of his class that he is, hastens to the rescue.

The economics and sociology of the capitalists are Ptolemaic in nature. Once man regarded the earth as the fixed center of the universe, now the bourgeois regards capitalism as the fixed center of economic life for all eternity. Therefore, having accepted this position, the bourgeois litterateur feels free to relegate it to the

oblivion of axiomatic truths, and begins to consider the brutalities of capitalism as eternal principles of human nature. But, just as in physics absolute distance, unrelated to some specific frame, does not exist, so in literature and all other forms of ideological expression, absolute values do not exist. Proletarian literature is enclosed within the dialectic frame of the dynamic mobility of classes. From that vantage-point it sees man and events in their round, as in a triple mirror.

Fellow-travelers and the Class Line

Since the expulsion of the economic romanticism prevailing in America till the crash in the autumn of the year 1929, American writers have increasingly shown a tendency to think in social terms, turning to the left for ideational substance. It would, however, be the sheerest wish-thinking to suppose that this can be taken at face value as an indication of a fundamental trend. It is quite certain that following the economic interests of their class, most bourgeois writers will swing towards fascism, while only a few, the most honest, the least dominated by delusions, will join the proletariat.

If it weren't for the object lesson of proletarian class-rule in Russia and the resurgence of Marxism all along the front, those writers who did take the final step would have probably sought an outlet from the confusion attendant upon the collapse of prosperity in mysticism or some type of neo-religion. It is precisely the iron dynamic of the Marxian philosophy that effected the apostasy of such writers as Edmund Wilson, Newton Arvin and Granville Hicks. I believe it is a mistake to think that it is the widespread misery and economic chaos that is the chief cause of these writers' espousal of collectivism. The widespread misery and the economic chaos merely impelled them to approach Marxism for a way out; without Marxism this misery and chaos would have simply thrown them into the arms of Mr. Eliot and M. Marinain.

With regard to fellow-travelers a lenient attitude is more or less in order. They cannot be expected to accept completely the proletarian viewpoint in one bound, but caution is necessary. If they make the Marxian world-view their own and evidence a comprehensive understanding of it, they can be counted on to integrate themselves into the proletariat. If they fail to do so, it is almost certain that sooner or later they will desert and re-join the bourgeoisie, as many socialists did during the war. The emotional, romantic approach to Communism is a paper bridge for anyone who wants to cross over into the camp of revolution. Lenin once censured Upton Sinclair for his pacifism, describing him as an "emotional Socialist without theoretical grounding." Only their ability and *willingness* to master Marxian theory will insure their loyalty. The view on the Russian Revolution they adhere to is a good test. Thus we find some fellow-travelers persisting in a pseudo-liberal attitude to the Soviet Union, perpetually deploring "the lack of freedom in Russia." Is it really so difficult to understand that the concept freedom under the capitalist regime is merely formal? "Freedom is the recognition of necessity." (Engels) Everything should of course be done to facilitate a fellow-traveler's assimilation, but once it becomes clear that his bourgeois class-roots are too strong, he should be neatly and rapidly dispatched on the road back, because he will only bring confusion into the ranks of the real militants.

In his essay *The Class Point-of-View* Lenin left us some good advice as to tactics in this respect. "The party of the proletariat," he wrote, "must learn to catch every liberal just at the moment when he is prepared to move forward an inch, and compel him to move forward a yard. If he is obstinate and won't, we shall go forward without him, and over his body."

Communist ideology challenges the morality of individualism, not qua incentive to great things, but as an anti-social incentive, and therefore as ultimately no incentive at all. It opposes the obsession with individual rights, not because right and freedom are unattainable, but because it sees them as rights and freedom only for a class implying an equivalent deprivation of rights and freedom for another, and more numerous, class. Here, perhaps, lies its greatest terror for the rest of the world—the terror of a new faith to which men are willing to harness their souls.

MAURICE DOBB

(*Soviet Russia and The World*, Sidgwick and Jackson, London).

SHERWOOD ANDERSON

A Writer's Notes

When I was recently in New York the New York papers were playing up a phase of Waldo Frank's new book on Russia that speaks of the difficulty the artist must meet in a civilization devoted to giving new life and health to workers. I haven't read Mr. Frank's book yet but I intend to. He would agree with me in this—that any difficulty the artist or proseman may meet in a civilization under the dictatorship of workers could easily be capped in any money civilization.

One of the saddest experiences to be had by any writer in America now is to go into the office of almost any American book or magazine publishing house. Lord, what gloom, what deep despair.

Why? No advertising, book sales dropping off, subscriptions to magazines almost impossible to get.

I went about the city, stepping often to listen to young Communist men and women speaking on street corners, and was a bit ashamed of my white suit, my Panama hat, my walking stick. A little girl Communist speaker at Ninth Street and Second Avenue came to me as I stood listening. This at night. "Are you a comrade out of work?" she asked with charming innocence. I swear to God I was ashamed.

The white linen suit, the Panama hat, the swagger walking stick.

"My dear child, men out of work are not rigged out like this."

As for American writers—God help the new man out now with a new book having poetic strength. He'll find restrictions enough, God knows.

Among the young fighting Communists I found poverty, youth, no gloom.

My own feeling now is that if it be necessary, in order to bring about the end of a money civilization and set up something new, healthy and strong, we of the so-called artist class have to be submerged, let us be submerged. Down with us. A little poverty and shaking down won't hurt us and I believe in my own class, the artists' class, I believe in our ability to survive. The world is old. Changes have swept over the world before. If new, worthwhile and significant men are to arise now in America the chances are a hundred to one that they will in any event come up out of the masses. It's in the air.

If the movement to free all men from the rule of money means the submerging of our class, let us be submerged. Down with us. Let's have no starving workers to save us. We'll survive. We'll swim. We will in the long run be healthier and better if we get it in the neck now along with the workers.



"HE WANTED A BONUS."

Herbert Kruckman