

MARCH 17, 1944

Artists in Uniform

THE exhibition of drawings and paintings by New Zealand servicemen and servicewomen opened last week in Wellington raises a question which few of us find it easy to answer. Why have war-artists at all? Why draw and paint war-scenes when the camera can do in a split-second what the brush may not do in days? That, at any rate, is how the issue probably appears to the majority, and if it were as simple and as sharp as that, the answer would be as simple, too. There would be no need for war artists, and no case for them. It would be sufficient that each army or regiment, each battleship or battle-squadron, each flight or squadron of fighting planes carried a camera and a competent man to work it. But most of us see dimly that this would not be sufficient. We see that the case for artists in war is the same case precisely as that for artists in peace: the deep desire of men to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand. It is no reflection on photographers to say that the camera cannot meet this desire; cannot express the human heart and mind. It can do amazing things, more and more amazing every day, but it cannot speak, sing, laugh, or cry. The brush in the hands of a great artist can. We may not know the answer when Tolstoy or some other philosopher asks formally what art is, but we know that it is more than reproduction or representation; that it is not mechanics; that we cannot imprison it in a sound-box or capture it in any kind of sensitive substance but a human being's brain. So when something as disturbing as war overtakes us it is not sufficient that the record should be external and mechanical. It is necessary that a record should be preserved which will tell the story in language that our children's children will understand as well as we do; perhaps better than we do; and although it is a lucky country that in the end does get its story told in that language, since great artists are almost as rare as blue moons, it is a very foolish and benighted country that does not aim at such a record.

LETTERS FROM LISTENERS

"CORVETTE K-225"

Sir,—“G.M.” reviewed *Corvette K-225*, acknowledged the heroism of a crew of a little ship which battles a Nazi submarine, but went out of his way to add that “when one considers it dispassionately,” there can be nothing more heroic than the conduct of the submarine crew. Has “G.M.” no criterion with which to distinguish between the crew of fraternal freedom-lovers defending his right to be a humanitarian liberal and the crew of conquering robots serving that vile monster of torture and tyranny, Hitler? “G.M.’s” reviews are titled “Speaking Candidly.” Candid speaking can apparently be of dubious assistance to Democracy in her glorious fight against Fascism. Democracy at war calls for candescent spokesmen.—KEEPER OF THE FLAME (Auckland).

(Our correspondent apparently does not know that, basically, “candid” and “candescent” mean exactly the same thing. His own “white flame” must have been flaring so brightly when he read this review that the light got in his eyes and made him see things which were not there. “G.M.” did not say what it is alleged he said about the conduct of the submarine crew. What he did say is that the submariners are “heroic also in their way” because, considered dispassionately, “there can hardly be any more terrible assignment” than submarine service. To suggest anything else is stupid, and stupidity can be of no assistance to democracy.—Ed.).

A FARMER'S DAUGHTER

Sir,—In your interesting article on Madame Zelanda, I came across the astounding statement that she is a farmer's daughter, and as though anticipating that this statement would be doubted, the words “believe it or not” were added. Sir, I think that this is straining our credulity too far. It is fantastic. I cannot believe it. My imagination simply boggles at anything so utterly incongruous, just as it has always boggled at the idea of the famous Australian prima donna Marjorie Lawrence being a farmer's daughter. I do feel that farmers ought to stick to cows and pigs, and leave the more imaginative and artistic side of life to those better fitted for it.—ALSO ONE (Upper Hutt).

"GERT AND DAIS"

Sir,—I was interested in what “Materfamilias” had to say about the Fibber McGee show, and Gert and Dais. We can take it that “Materfamilias” did not find the Fibber McGee show funny: if she had she would not have run round asking psychologists why thousands of other people had found it funny.

If she finds Gert and Dais funny she feels it is not the most wholesome of humour, as her laughter is condescending. I can understand a sense of superiority causing pity or causing disgust but not amusement except in a satirist whose amusement I imagine is more akin to weeping than laughter. I find the McGees funny not for psychological reasons, for I do not identify myself or my friends with the McGees. Perhaps if I had to listen often I should grow tired of the programme and it is probably owing to a deficiency of comedy in radio fare that I listen at all.

My opinion of Gert and Dais will not go for much with “Materfamilias,” for I must confess I enjoy the jokes in *Punch*. Here again I do not react in a

psychological manner: there is no condescension in my laughter or love of Gert or Dais. Dais' voice and chuckle never fail to remind me that there are such things as cockles to one's heart and that it is very pleasant having them warmed. If there are any sensations apart from sheer fun, they are a mild regret, and a nostalgia and an anger with a type of education that can stop the flow of native intelligence and dry up the wells of laughter. I am waiting with interest for “Materfamilias” to find something she regards as true comedy in the programmes. I am sure her reactions will be correctly psychological.

JOCASTO (Dunedin).

A BURNING QUESTION

Sir,—As a constant listener to 2YD's *Opera Houses of the World* series I am beginning to wonder if there are any Opera Houses in Central Europe. Judging by the outlandish places we visit, it appears that the strain of finding suitable establishments is nearing breaking point. In any case, it seems that any successful Opera House must be burned down a few times during its history and rebuilt, usually “under great difficulties” and “at considerable expense.”

If, in the endeavour to avoid featuring any German or Austrian Opera House, it is found necessary to fall back on our local institution, would it qualify, or would we have to burn it first?—HANS SACHS (Day's Bay).

BOMBING OF GERMANY

Sir,—In a recent issue you had a letter by Audax II. about the bombing of Germany. It is rather hard to imagine that anyone at this stage can look on the war as a clean one. If an individual is involved in a fight and his opponent resorts to kicking and gouging, it would take a super-man not to retaliate. When it is a case of kill or be killed, most of us prefer it to be the other man. The Russians' scorched earth policy undoubtedly helped them tremendously. Germany's inhuman methods narrowly missed gaining their ends. Most people know war for what it is, a ghastly business. The only hope after this one is over is that its horrible effect on women and children may prevent another. There is one sure thing, the people of England, after putting up with nearly five years of bombing, are not likely to let any Government stop now. They remember only too well the result of the leniency of 1918.—“OLD DIGGER” (Gisborne).

Sir,—In answer to your footnote to my letter, I should like to quote the following two sentences from your leading article of February 18:

“But it is one thing to feel the horror of it and another thing to protest against it. The protests have now begun, and they are exceedingly dangerous.”

AUDAX II. (Wellington).

(We asked our correspondent to quote the sentence in which we denied the right of anyone to say that bombing Germany was a horrible business. Instead of doing that, he quotes two sentences in which we (1) clearly admit the horror but (2) distinguish as clearly between feeling it and saying that it must stop.—Ed.).