

biographical sketches like the famous "profiles" of the *New Yorker* magazine—a feature and a title that, since the *New Yorker* started them, back in the 'twenties, have gone into the language.

It is not the difference between being allowed to be scurrilous and not being allowed. The *New Yorker's* profiles, for instance, are never that. They are superlatively written portraits of the life, manners, career and motives of anybody the magazine is interested in. It may be a politician, or a zoologist, a writer, or a crooner, or a collector of antiques. Almost any living American would be proud to be profiled by the *New Yorker*. Some victims have howled for vengeance, and found none in the law. I doubt if anywhere else in the world you could read a picture of a man's life and character so devastating as the profiles that the *New Yorker* printed about Alexander Woolcott or Walter Winchell. I doubt whether an English dramatic critic could write about an ex-wife as an American dramatic critic once did: "When I married Miss So-and-So, she gave her profession as that of actress. I saw nothing in last night's performance to justify the description." That is a pretty mild sentence to read in America. But I am told that in Britain the actress would need to do no more than collect a few witnesses who would declare that she was an actress, and she would have a sure-fire chance of collecting damages.

Freedom and Mr. Mencken

This freedom, uninhibited by a delicate law, or by the fear that anybody would care to appeal to that law, has lately been lavishly demonstrated by H. L. Mencken, the irreverent bad boy of Baltimore, the old magazine editor who in the nineteen-twenties was possibly the most powerful single intellectual influence in America. Mr. Mencken was recently invited by *Life* magazine to sound off about the state of the world. Anybody who knows his work might have guessed that he considers the world to-day as a lunatic asylum run mostly by its inmates. The article was titled simply "Mr. Mencken Sounds Off." Sitting at breakfast one morning, he thought aloud in his outrageous and inimitable way and the reporter took it all down, and *Life* printed it. Don't please get the idea that *Life*, or any of its readers, thought it was being in any way daring or courageous. I doubt if it would cross the mind of an American to wonder that the magazine could publish such a piece at all. But at a rough guess, I should say that if Mr. Mencken's piece had been printed in Britain, he and the magazine would have been snowed under the next morning with anything from a dozen to a score of libel actions. Nobody need be afraid that I will begin to quote names and descriptions, though I feel sadness at not being able to roll the names and the accompanying adjectives over on my transatlantic tongue. But, just as a hint of the kind of thing, I should say that Mr. Mencken has a low opinion of practically all American presidents and most statesmen everywhere. The recent run of presidents he calls frauds or nonentities run by frauds.

I am not here making a plea or implying a criticism. I am reporting the most marked discoverable difference between press freedom as it is generally understood in Britain and the United States, the widely different limits put on public writing by a tight libel law and by a loose one. If American statesmen and businessmen tend to wear a harried look, now you know why.

LETTERS FROM LISTENERS

(Continued from page 5)

FOSTER PARENTS

Sir,—I was very interested in the letter by "Hannah" (*Listener* November 8). I give her credit for her sincerity, but can't agree with her that foster-parents take welfare children to augment the family income. Boarders would pay double and wouldn't have to be clothed, trained, etc., and wouldn't be a 24-hours-a-day responsibility.

I think a love for children and a desire to share happy homes or have somebody to mother is the real reason. There is no need for "Hannah" or anybody to be "ignorant about these dealings." Payment has nothing to do with being a real mother. We are or we are not. The children are all lovely when they are small and don't understand their position. However, things are very different when the child grows older. They want all the things every young person wants—wristlet watch, a bike, a violin, dancing lessons, singing lessons, music lessons, pictures, tennis, etc. Mum does her best. She likes to see her children the same as their friends. If the child is kept by the foster-parents until it can stand on its own earnings the addition to the family income is a bit of a myth.

Foster-parents need big hearts and get more kicks than pats. The Welfare Department does its best for the children and always sifts out any complaint. The welfare of the child is its job first and last. Children who are clever get every chance to develop their talents. The problem for foster-parents and welfare officers and teachers are the backward mites (there are plenty of them too), the ones who find it hard to make their grade at school. These are never the teachers' pets. They need all the love and mothering they can get and it is not easy to mother them or teach them. They are not always grateful either.

We all want it to "be well with the child." The Welfare Officers have the right to inspect their clothing, beds, etc. at any time. They can visit the child at home or at school (they try not to visit at school). School teachers make a report to the Department at least twice a year. Sunday school teachers, ministers, neighbours, and relations all keep a friendly eye on the child. The Department will pay gym. fees, and most children are Guides or Scouts and have to attend regularly at whatever church they belong to.

The children themselves are surely the best registers of their state of contentment. A happy, healthy child is vastly different from one who is sick or unhappy. In some ways these little ones are better protected and better provided for than our own children and when they start to work they have no responsibilities towards their people. I could write a lot more from many different angles on this subject but they do not matter. The only thing that does matter is that these innocent little ones should have the best chance that the Government and the foster-parents can give them.

A BAKER'S DOZEN (Wellington).

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