

LITERATURE IN JEOPARDY

(By Airmail — Special to
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AT the present moment, when authors in Britain are preparing to put their economic difficulties before the Chancellor of the Exchequer, asking for a correction of the anomalous method of taxation whereby an author may work for years under difficulties or with little reward and then, on writing a profitable book that is really the fruit of all those years, lose most of its royalties in taxation because they are treated as the income of a single year, there has occurred a demonstration that whatever understanding the Government may shortly show of their problems, the public (at any rate the public that reads *The Times*), has very little. Some say that life is so hard for authors now that the very nature of their output might be affected—literature in jeopardy! In any case, the story of the demonstration seems to me to make interesting reading whether or not one cares a rap about the continuance of present English writing. I pass it on.

The demonstration I speak of came about in this way. In January, P. H. Newby, a youngish author, wrote a letter to *The Times*, saying,

There was a time when the young author could take himself off to the country, rent a cottage for 5/- a week, live on bread and cheese, and produce a flow of poems, essays, plays, and novels until such time as he was summoned to the capital and there presented with bags of clinking gold and the Order of Merit. Nowadays, however, unless he turns farm labourer or chauffeur-handyman he will discover that there are no cottages to be had in the country. He will not even stand a chance of being given a council house, for local authorities have other things to think about than the preservation of our quaint customs.

He went on to suggest that anyone with a house or cottage to let should notify the Society of Authors (the live, representative, and well-organised body that is shortly to approach Sir Stafford Cripps and ask why a woman writer who wins an American literary prize of £35,000, thereby, incidentally, gaining dollars for Britain, should lose all but £4,000 of it in tax, whereas someone who fills in a football-pool form correctly and wins £35,000 can keep the lot; and other questions with equal point).

The result of Mr. Newby's appeal, the limitations of which were pretty obvious, was a flow of offers from far and near (since printed in *The Author*, the Society's journal) which betrayed what are surely some of the most curious private beliefs that could possibly be held, at large, about the needs and the purses of one particular profession.

One woman offered to sell a cottage near Northampton (two reception, two bed, usual offices, electricity and water) for £4,200. Another offered a "furnished country house" in the New Forest, "fully staffed, over 2,000 books, moderate rent according to circumstances."

Lady —, of Wantage, Berks., wrote, "I badly need an author (complete with wife and family) who besides authoring (1) has a passion for manual work, associated with gardening, livestock, carpentry, bricklaying and all the other



"Once upon a time . . ."

arduous things that have to be done in the country, (2) with a good enough address and bearing, and strong enough personality to help me to obtain the necessary permits and sanctions to restore an old Tudor cottage which is at present more or less of a ruin but for which architect's plans have already been made. . . . The cottage will take time (the author's?) but there is immediate possibility of rigging up a secluded hide-out in which an author could be undisturbed" (except, presumably, by the exacting Lady —).

Commander—R.N. offered rooms in his country house, with cooking facilities, naming (in addition to spare seats available in the car in which he travels daily to London), the following enticements: "a large garden, garden produce, eggs, and rabbits."

A woman with a house on the banks of the Thames in Berkshire offered her spare room for four guineas a week "inclusive of everything." A bachelor-clergyman offering half of his house at £100 a year seemed to be murmuring in a sad faraway voice when he added, "The house dates from 1638, and Nelson's mother was born in it. I cannot claim to be an author myself, but I do historical research, and am at the moment writing a life of a 17th Century parsonage." A woman with a flat in Chelsea who is "out all day except Saturday and Sunday" seemed to hope that the mere fact that her own room is sunny and looks out on gardens at the back of Cheyne Walk (where George Eliot, Count D'Orsay, D. G. Rossetti and Turner lived, and Carlyle near by) would make some "author" desire to go there after 10.0 a.m. (Monday to Friday), and have his thoughts gathered up again by 6.0 p.m. "What I really want is for the room to be used," she said.

On the other hand, there were some remote and inconvenient cottages offered at reasonable rents (one for 10/- to an author "of the harmless type"). What a change, though, from March, 1916, when D. H. Lawrence and Erieda took a cottage in Cornwall for £5 a year and invited Katherine Mansfield and J. Middleton Murry to share it with them (for a shilling a week, presumably) and have "a blood-brotherhood between us all" ("I am blut-bruder").

I remember now that it was Mr. Newby who recently gave an excellent

talk in the Third Programme on Grimm's Fairy Tales, in which he dwelt on the magic of those four words, "Once upon a time. . ."

HARD as it may be for the English author, however, who cannot get a roof over his head at a price he can pay without sacrificing something of his essential nature, his lot is surely no worse than that of his brothers-in-the-arts in Russia where, it seems, a new sin has all at once been discovered in homelessness. This week three separate messages from Moscow appeared on the same day, two on separate pages of *The Star*, one in the *Manchester Guardian*. Of the two *Star* messages, one was from Reuter, the other B.U.P. The *Guardian's* came from Associated Press. I abbreviate all three:

Two professors of the Soviet Institute of Cinematography, who trained students as film directors, cameramen, scenario writers, artists, and actors, have been dismissed for "serious errors" in teaching. . . . The Vice-Minister of Cinematography, Mr. N. Sakontikov, called them "homeless cosmopolitans." (The *Star*, March 22).

The task of the Russian Music Hall was defined to-day by A. Anisimov, Director of the Musical Institutions of the Soviet Union Commission on Arts: "With the weapon of satire, the music hall must unmask the looters of public property, bureaucrats, grafters, boot lickers and vulgarities. . . . He quoted the use of foreign stage names, jazz, and other Western-style dancing, and the neglect of Russian folk songs as "homeless cosmopolitan influences." (The *Star*, March 22).

Six Soviet architects, three of them members of the Scientific Council of the Academy of Architecture, were scolded in *Pravda* to-day for "trying with all their might to retard the creative growth of young Soviet scientists and push them off the correct path." *Pravda* said the Scientific Council . . . "had become a refuge for grovelling cosmopolites." (The *Guardian*, March 22).

THE 32-year-old impresario Harold Fielding, who has arranged after three years' negotiations to bring the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra to Britain in May, has just announced, "I reckon I shall lose about £25,000." The Orchestra will travel first-class and stay at the best hotels, at a total cost of about £85,000, of which Mr. Fielding says he expects to recover £60,000. These announcements, which one might suppose to be more properly the cocktail-bar grumbles of an ambitious business-man calculating an effect, come out as news with the obliging co-operation of the *Daily Herald* (Labour) as also Mr. Fielding's complaint that the BBC will not pay him the £1,000 he asks for a two-hour broadcast. ("I wrote to Sir William Haley asking for an opportunity to talk the matter over with him. He refused. From now on I shall have nothing to do with the BBC.") Indeed they are news, if that is what news is. In any case, it will be interesting to hear the famous streamlined orchestra

in the flesh. When the *Daily Herald* reporter said that his latest venture was "no business proposition" Mr. Fielding replied, "I think music is above money." Good luck to him, then. Twenty-eight concerts will be given. Prices will never be above two guineas, the lowest will be 5/-, and at the Harringay (stadium) Festival for the people there may even be seats at 1/6. But unless the BBC will go above its offer of £300 for a broadcast we shall not hear it on our radios.

IT is interesting to see that broadcasting has begun to take over one of the incidental functions of the Press in the political sphere. The successful Labour candidate at the Sowerby by-election (caused by the resignation of Mr. Belcher) was a well-known broadcaster, Douglas Houghton, and a very useful one too. Mr. Houghton was an official in the Inland Revenue when the BBC decided to inaugurate a regular session of advice on taxation and similar matters. Before long he was employing a team of assistants and presenting a weekly talk "Can I Help You?" which of course established him in the public mind as a man with a thorough grasp of many problems that bewilder the man-in-the-street as he tries to pick his way through regulations to-day. He must now give up this work, which in fact has been taken over already by others, and is likely to be done in future by a team of speakers. Thus at the moment there is nobody broadcasting regularly in that tradition of adviser on personal problems that was established by the late John Hilton, unless one counts the Radio Doctor, whose fruity urbanities about the interior processes of the human body are popular breakfast-listening.

The Radio Doctor himself (Dr. Charles Hill, secretary of the B.M.A.) stood for Cambridge University at the last general election, but was defeated by H. Wilson Harris, editor of *The Spectator*.

Now another radio personality is to have a go — Bruce Belfrage, actor and commentator, who is 48. He began his career as an actor at Stratford-on-Avon in 1923, joined the BBC in 1935, and was a news-reader and announcer in the early part of the war before joining the R.N.V.R. He is prospective Liberal candidate for South Buckinghamshire.



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