

LISTENER

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Our Own Words

NOTHING is more futile in general than remembering past follies; especially follies of the tongue and of the pen. But there may be a case at the end of three years of war for taking stock of our own mental development. It was clear enough at the beginning of the struggle that our progress would depend on the courage and reality of our thinking. We got into the war because we had forgotten what facts looked like. We can get successfully out of it only by coming to ourselves again and to terms with some ugly realities. These things we are doing, slowly and of course painfully. But it is a shock to recall how consistently in the early days of the war we all ran away from simple realities. As an indication—just a faint indication, since we have not dared to disinter the most egregious of our follies—we reprint in this issue a thin trickle of the absurdities that have run through English newspapers during the last three years; and American newspapers too. It is not pleasant to read these, since they indicate a weakness from which nobody yet has fully recovered; but we are far gone still if it is not profitable. And it cannot be necessary to add that for this pillory everybody has qualified, some more often than others, but even the wisest now and again. It would not, for example, give anybody better digestion if we printed again what Mr. Churchill said about the Russian attack on Finland; but it would be easier to justify what he said then than to see sense in G. B. Shaw's remark last June that all the Allies had to do now was to sit down and watch Uncle Joe Stalin making mince-meat of the German Army. In this sad glass-house no one dare throw stones. But we are not forbidden to look about us, and to risk an occasional glance over our shoulder.

LETTERS FROM LISTENERS

Letters sent to "The Listener" for publication should be as brief as possible, and should deal with topics covered in "The Listener" itself. Correspondents must send in their names and addresses even when it is their wish that these should not be published. We cannot undertake to give reasons why all or any portion of a letter is rejected.

HOLLYWOOD AND THE STATUS QUO

Sir,—The flanking movement in "G.M.'s" very effective offensive (*Listener*, July 10), contains a reminder that definitions are important. One of the three who discussed the modern novel, challenged the other two "to name one memorable novel which was not written in a spirit of disillusionment." But what is a "memorable modern novel"? In some quarters (I don't include these particular disputants), a memorable novel is a novel of sordidness, frustration and misery. Better a consumptive, or perhaps more artistic still, a syphilitic, dying in a slum, than a happy man breasting a hill on a fine spring morning. If I say *The Good Companions* is a memorable novel, no doubt I shall be received with barks of derision, but I do. Curious, isn't it, that "realism" should have come to connote what is drab, ugly, vicious, and miserable? Are not laughter, happiness and beauty just as real?

However, enough of this. "G.M." is right. We do escape by doors into fairyland, only the fairyland is palatial country houses, with butlers, footmen, and late dinners. The percentage of English fiction and drama that deals with folk who dress for dinner is enormous. Pinero did a real service in the renaissance of the English drama, but I don't know that there is a play of his that hasn't a dress suit on the stage or in the background. The West End theatre stands on a dress suit. Nearly every detective story has a butler.

Novelists and dramatists know their public. We like holidaying in this company. I do myself. But a few years ago, a discerning librarian put me on to a book called *Three Fevers*, by Leo Walmsley. It was a story about a Yorkshire fishing village. The only love interest in it was the affection between a young fisherman and his wife, and I regret to say the tale was so distressingly bourgeois that they remained in love, and there was no third party. I liked this book so much that I have looked out, and not without profit, for other things Walmsley has written. "G.M." will remember the film version of *Three Fevers*, an excellent piece of work. There wasn't a dress suit on the landscape, which shows what can be done.

A section of the dress-clothes school of novelists and playwrights is the group who deal in non-moral or vicious wastrels, men and women who slink round between bedtime and dawn. These gyrating shadows have an astonishing vogue in proportion to their numbers and importance. Are they more than .005 per cent of the population? One of Mr. Priestley's services to literature is that he has brought into it a wholesome

wind from the provinces, a part of England that many of us are apt to overlook. I would rather have created Jess Oakroyd, the Yorkshire artisan hero of *The Good Companions*, than the whole gallery of Aldous Huxley's rootless sophisticates. St. John Ervine once invited Noel Coward to go and see how people lived in the industrial north, but I don't think Mr. Coward will ever accept. He would be too far from home.

A.M. (Wellington).

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS

Sir,—Your interesting leader on "Conscientious Objectors" called to mind how nearly 2,000 years ago a Roman Tribunal dealt with one. The story is recorded in Acts XVIII. (I quote from the New Testament in Basic English). Paul, after his encounter with the Greek philosophers, left Athens and went to Corinth. There he worked with Aquila, a fellow tentmaker; but on the Sabbath day had, with some success "discussions in the Synagogue, turning Greeks and Jews to the Faith." Crispus, a ruler of the Synagogue, was converted. This incensed a large company of Jews, and they dragged Paul before the court, over which Gallio, Governor of Achaia, presided. The charge was "teaching the people to give worship to God in a way that is against the law." Paul, when about to defend himself, was interrupted by Gallio who, seeing that the dispute could not be settled by a Roman Tribunal, said to the Jews: "If this was anything to do with wrongdoing or crime, there would be a reason for me to give you a hearing; but if it is a question of words or names or of your law, see to it yourselves." And he sent them away from the Judge's seat. In this decision Gallio was true to the religious tolerance of Rome, that permitted all people throughout the Empire to practise their own religion; and true to his own character, as may be gathered from other sources. He was a brother of Seneca the famous philosopher, who wrote of him, "No mortal man is so gracious to anybody as he is to everybody."

As the Greek police were clearing the Court for the next case, the Jews attacked the Ruler of the Synagogue, "and gave him blows," but Gallio "took no official notice of this," and for this misunderstood phrase he has been black-listed as an indifferent, irreligious, cynical man, "who cared for none of these things" (authorised version). What things? Certainly not the "things" which Paul believed and taught, but simply this: dealing with Sosthenes as the Jews intended, apparently, to deal with Paul.

E. C. ISAAC (Wellington).

ANSWER TO CORRESPONDENT

"Teacher" (Paremata): We are surprised that a teacher should so completely misunderstand us. We have not questioned the authority of the Oxford Dictionary. We have said that if the Oxford Dictionary is to be followed in one case it will have to be followed in others and that it may lead its followers into embarrassing positions.



Announcement
concerning the

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