

Question Time

(By WHIM-WHAM)

OH, he expounds what he has read,
And she repeats what she has heard.
About the War and what's in Store—
And still I have not said a Word,
Yet know there's no Escape for me
As soon as Mrs. Prattle brings
The soft Entreaty out at last:
"Do tell us what you think of Things!"

A CROSS a tilted Teacup Rim
The Ball of Talk is bounced to me;
A Plate of toasted Buns is passed
Round the expectant Gallery.
God knows, and so ought they, that I
Set up as neither Sage nor Seer!
What Things they think I think about
I haven't got the least Idea.

"IT All depends what Things you mean—"
I falter out, but on they go.
How long the War is going to last
Is what they'd really like to know,
And any vague Remark may be
For them a Portent or a Sign,
Though all of them are well aware
Their Guess is quite as good as mine.

WHAT do I think of Things? Indeed,
I think as Little as I can
Of things of which the Outcome lies
Beyond the Thought of any Man.
Surely the only Course for him
Who's pestered so for what he thinks,
is
To change the subject or preserve
A Silence stony as the Sphinx's!

RECENT MUSIC

No. 25: By Marsyas.

WHY has nobody ever told me about *Le Carnaval des Animaux* before? Here have I been, knowing Saint-Saens as the composer whose music holds my attention for about as long (and for the same reasons) as the announcer holds my attention while he succeeds in pronouncing the man's name—in fact, just a kind of *curiosa felicitas*—and in a moment I find this sort of thing going on behind my back. Now there's nothing I like so much, at times, as a patch of musical wit.

Not that M. Saint-Saens can make me laugh at my favourite piece of Berlioz just by guying it inanely, any more than Berlioz can make me grin while he whips up the *Dies Irae* plain song in a "Witches' Sabbath." Nor that the strange sounds by which Saint-Saens represents the braying of a donkey (a very French donkey, in this case) are any funnier to hear than his own surname; and the skit which comprises trills and scale exercises being repeated a semitone higher each time isn't painfully laugh-making the second time you hear

it, if it so happens that the announcer has left you to form your own conclusions as to which animal is what—which are the long-eared animals, which are the long-legged, which are the things that go boomp in the night and so on. Even that curious parody of his own, *Danse Macabre* (evidently an allusion to "the things that go, etc.") isn't the best thing about the *Carnival of Animals*, this "zoological fantasy" which Saint-Saens did not release for public performance during his lifetime.

No; Saint-Saens's most cherished joke in the whole thing was to include in a context of satire, burlesque, punning, and caricature, the whole of that well-known composition *The Swan*. I am reminded of a certain witty little illustrated booklet published in the early days of the war by A. R. D. Fairburn wherein, after reading passages in the best vein of James Joyce's parody, and weird fantastic stories, the reader's eyes suddenly fall on a poem called "Not Understood" quoted in toto.

* * *

SAINT-SAENS probably knew that "laugh and the world laughs with you" holds good more than ever when it happens to be the world you're laughing at. And he wrote *Le Cygne* for the amusement of his circle of Parisian

friends, having in mind some lady 'cellist who would be enraptured by that chromatic alteration which diverts the opening phrase on its repetition; who would forget for the moment that a woman never looks so ungainly as when straddling the violoncello, and would cast her eyes upwards "like a maid in a heavenly dream," and flutter her eyelids, in an ecstasy of cygnolatry.

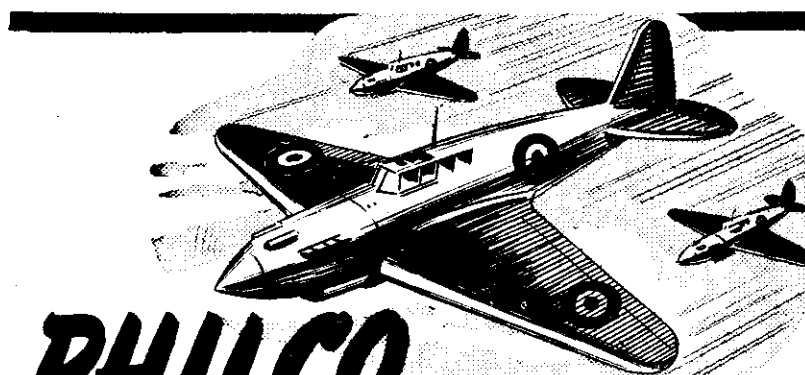
Le Cygne has served the purposes of a thousand salon musicians, hotel pianists, "Quiet Moods," and "Your Cavaliers," and no one who has not heard it in its original context will permit me my attitude (dare I call it cynicism?); but there is no doubt at all in my mind. In fact I suspect that the swan of Saint-Saens's acquaintance was a descendant of that other bird of Orlando Gibbons's, which some 300 years before "thus sung her first and last and sung no more."

Farewell all joys, O death, come
close mine eyes,
More geese than swans now live,
more fools than wise.

* * *

WHERE I have written, above, "there's nothing I like so much at times as a patch of musical wit," it will be noticed that I took care not to say

(Continued on next page)



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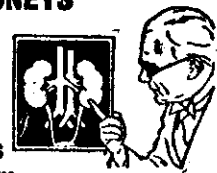
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