

Time for a Bi-carb.

by "AUGUSTUS"

GUNDARSON sits beside me in the stalls and his wife is next to him again. The flimsy curtain slides back, corrugating the title of the first short film:

The Romance of the Post Office

"Yah!" Gundarson is a critical movie-goer. "About as romantic as Port Chalmers from the train."

"Shh, Gundy," pleads Monica.

The voice of the commentator breaks through the sprightly overture: "When you drop that letter into the box, do you ever stop to think what lies behind . . ."

"Never!" asserts Gundarson, who is really squirming now.

The camera catches in swift succession a series of honest, clean living, letter-posting men and women who have more sense than to stand about in a busy street mooning over the fate of their letter. But the voice from the screen is exposing these amiable folk as insensitive, unimaginative, even inhuman—something akin to the Russian coach-horse whose driver froze to death while the horse was knocking back vodka in a near-by shebeen.

Now, as an all too telling contrast to the indifference of the letter-posters, we are shown the little man who really cares, whose loving duty it is to come round in a high-powered, centrally-heated van, open the box and take out OUR letter. The romance has begun. Our letter is bagged, de-bagged, sorted, x-rayed, spray-painted, dumped on to midnight expresses and generally cursed along its romantic way until a whistling "postie," bleeding with human interest, drops it into a callous and unreflecting slot.

By this time Gundarson is in the foyer sending up mushrooms of protesting smoke. As the title of the next feature is revealed (What's in Your Porridge Plate) I pass the lollies across to Monica and slip out. Gundarson is composing:

"When you lie back in your summer-house these warm spring evenings (lulled by the hum of mowers as your gardeners trim up the lawns), and as your fingers drift among the strings of your zither, do you ever Pause to Think of the Story Behind that zither? Do you see the peasant folk of the Rhone valley issuing from their simple dwellings at

the early dawn, dancing in their antique clogs towards the marshes where grow the reeds Paganini once strummed upon? If you do you're softer in the head than I thought. Probably your zither-playing is pretty mean, too.

"Why can't they leave these cretinous peasants where they've been for centuries, bogged down in their clogs? Let them keep out of my summer-house. All this educational matter! These days education is thrust upon us by law, like military service. It's good for us, and should therefore be free. It's an anachronism and a gross imposition to educate a man who's paid down 2.3 at the door."

By this time quite a little crowd whose porridge plates have been thoroughly scoured are gathered about us. Gundarson warms up.

"As for me, I'm going to crack open my eggs at breakfast and the devil a thought am I going to give to the pangs of the hen that laid it. She's laid her egg—well all right. That's what she's paid to do, and I'm the one who pays her. If there was any Romance behind her egg-laying (and I'm not skilled enough to know when opening a boiled egg whether or not it's a pledge of love), if she has had her romance so much the better for her. I'm not one to pry into her affairs. Or the poultry-keeper's either. He's probably doing all right.

"Great heavens, we'd go mad if we took these education-mongers seriously. As you pull on your socks you should apparently pause to let the story behind them flit through your imagination. Rows and rows of whirling bobbins and mechanical sockers should pulse and jig in your fancy. Then there is the army of ordinary, lovable, uncomplaining patriotic girls (just like you, lady) who are giving up their lives to clothing OUR feet.

"But the vision recedes further. What is the story behind the wool behind those socks? . . . The chuckling brooks of the Hielands, cattle knee-deep in water-cress, a decaying cottage with thatched chimneys, and oh cor! a collie dog, which with a glucose coronach as background music is reckoned to push up dollar-earnings on socks like nobody's business. An arthritic shepherd stumbles up to a skyline, and then—this is it—we see the sheep, from which comes



"As far as I am concerned, milk still comes out of a bottle"

the wool from which. . . Are we seriously expected to finish up in the gorse every time we change our socks?

"The film pedlars are not the only ones trafficking in human interest and What Lies Behind. Look at the picture magazines—It's all in the Day's Work for the Sniggs Family. Old man Sniggs is a big-time architect who's built his own barbecue, or he's a veterinary surgeon or a parish cop. He is shown groping into his pants in the middle of the night to go fix a foaling cart-horse or lock up a drunk. Mrs. Sniggs, tousled up just like you and me at that hour, is packing him a bite of kipper and some char. Later the little Sniggses appear and snigger off to school. Well, I've got along fine so far without knowing these Sniggses and I'm not complaining. The only vets and cops I know have no human interest about them—they're too careful about what the neighbours would think, good respectable people. They don't stand for democracy or decency or silent service or the dignity of trade—they're too busy being vets and cops.

"Nothing is merely what it seems. It's a sort of neo-pseudo-Platonism these boys are peddling. You look at this door, but it's not a door. It is merely the clumsy shadow of a wondrous idea: about it like nebular rings spin the

romance of the joiner's shop, the scent of 3-ply, the glue-pot and faithful Bert the joiner's mate; outside Bert with his putty knife spin Whitman's forest and the rugged breed of logging men. The axe rings against the bark, the lofty head now doomed to fall shivers against a leafy ceiling—TimBAH! Bah! Let 'em get on with it I say, and leave me to my bricklaying.

"All this itchy, guilt-ridden humanness gets under my vest. We haven't the digestion for democracy. We daren't serve or be served. We must bring the Postie and the Milkie in on to our hearthrugs with Mummie and Daddie and Auntie and the boys at Campbell Island. Only an old scholar ever talks now of 'the men of my year.' Soon there won't be any one of us whose job hasn't exposed him to the family interest of all his fellow fellers.

"Think of all the scrumptious rumours—what Royal personage was distinctly overheard to say to another, 'Cheer up, Mum, How's your poor feet?' Even these were Only Human After All. There's a radio series with that title which flirts with the names and tactfully avoids the works of the great—Chopin had twenty children, Carlyle's dog ate up the manuscript of The Law of Gravity. That pretty well puts them up on the spare bed for the night, doesn't it?"

Monica has been floated out on the tidal bore of Interval, and now thrusts an ice cream into Gundarson's face. He chomps balefully at it, "You know what it's all done for? Simply to make us feel pretty good, not so dusty. The second half of the programme is going to show us dames more delectable than any we've got at home, and blokes with more money in their wallets and muscles on their chests than we'll ever have. So in the first half they tone us up, brisk up our little muscles. Why, by ice cream time we're great little jokers, practically fit to jump right up there into the dame's lap.

"Moreover, locked away in our knowledgeable little skulls are the inside stories of lens grinding, wine pressing, mackerel fishing, dam building, Sudan irrigating, boiler making at Petone . . . in short, we're educated."

He is being led quietly away to his seat. He mutters over his shoulder: "As far as I'm concerned milk still comes out of a bottle."

New L.P. Version of Puccini's "Manon"

MANON LESCAUT was Puccini's first great success among his operas. He says in one of his letters: "If only I could be a purely symphonic writer! But that was not for me. I was born so many years ago . . . and Almighty God touched me with His little finger and said, 'Write for the theatre—mind, only for the theatre,' and I have obeyed the supreme command." So, on the night of February 1, 1893, *Manon* was produced at the Teatro Regio, Turin. In the comments by the Press the following day the work was acclaimed as magnificent, which is rather surprising since Puccini had used no fewer than three librettists. His keen theatrical sense made him ask for alterations in each of their librettos, and caused some hard feelings. Puccini once wrote that when he was composing he had to be able to see his artists at work, meaning that



unless a scene appeared so clearly before him that it became almost visual he could not write. The third librettist who worked on *Manon* was Luigi Illica, and this was the beginning of the collaboration which brought forth the fine

librettos of *La Boheme*, *Tosca* and *Butterfly*.

The Abbé Prévost's story of the young courtesan, Manon, who was loved by the noble but hopelessly-infatuated Chevalier des Grieux, has long held a fascination for composers. Both Auber and Massenet treated it before Puccini. Its ambivalent moral of the spoiled beauty, half-redeemed by her love but unable to resist the flesh-pots of Paris, until she is eventually cast out and dies a tragic death, caused a storm when Puccini's opera was first produced at Covent Garden in 1894. Even today critics recognise it as containing some of the most ardent pages that Puccini ever wrote.

On Sunday, November 28, at 7.0 p.m., YC stations will broadcast a new L.P. version of *Manon Lescaut*, with Clara Petrella and Vasco Campagnano as the lovers. The Chorus and Orchestra of the Italian Radio, Turin, will be conducted by Federico del Cupolo.