

Chapter Ten

WITH PEN AND CAMERA THROUGH DARKEST
AMERICA

§ 1

IF IN the year 1925 (or thereabouts) you had gone to a cocktail party in New York attended by writers, critics, artists, musicians, and professional men and women interested in the newest ideas and the newest tendencies in the arts, you would probably have heard some of the following beliefs expressed or implied in the conversation screamed over the Martinis:—

That there ought to be more personal freedom, particularly sex freedom.

That reformers were an abomination and there were too many laws.

That Babbitts, Rotarians, and boosters, and indeed American business men in general, were hopelessly crass.

That the masses of the citizenry were dolts with thirteen-year-old minds.

That most of the heroes of historical tradition, and especially of Victorian and Puritan tradition, were vastly overrated and needed "debunking."

That America was such a standardized, machine-ridden, and convention-ridden place that people with brains and taste naturally preferred the free atmosphere of Europe.

If after a lapse of ten years you had strayed into a similar gathering in 1935 (or thereabouts) you would hardly have

been able to believe your ears, so sharp would have been the contrast. It is unlikely that you would have found anybody showing any conversational excitement over sex freedom, or the crudeness of Babbitts, or the need for debunking Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. (It was characteristic of the nineteen-thirties that the Queen Victoria with whom Strachey had dealt sharply in the previous decade became a popular heroine as portrayed on the stage by Helen Hayes, and that Longfellow himself and other worthies of Victorian Boston were largely restored to favor in Van Wyck Brooks's *The Flowering of New England* in 1936.) In the conversation screamed over the somewhat more palatable Martinis of 1935 you would probably have heard some of the following beliefs expressed or implied:—

That reform—economic reform, to be sure, but nevertheless reform by law—was badly needed, and there ought to be more stringent laws. (Some members of the company might even scout reform as useless pending the clean sweep of capitalist institutions which must be made by the inevitable Communist Revolution.)

That the masses of the citizenry were the people who really mattered, the most fitting subjects for writer and artist, the people on whose behalf reform must be overtaken. (Indeed, if you had listened carefully you might have heard a literary critic who had been gently nurtured in the politest of environments referring to *himself* as a proletarian, so belligerently did he identify himself with the masses.)

That America was the most fascinating place of all and the chief hope for freedom; that it was worth studying and depicting in all its phases but particularly in those uglier phases that cried most loudly for correction; and that it was worth working loyally to save, though perhaps it was beyond

saving and was going to collapse along with the rest of civilization.

"What has happened in these ten years?" you might have asked. "Have these people got religion?"

They had. The religion, of course, was not the religion of the churches; one of the few points of resemblance between the prevailing attitude of such a group in 1925 and its prevailing attitude in 1935 was that at both times its members were mostly agnostic if not atheist. What animated these men and women was the secular religion of social consciousness to which a reference was made in Chapter VI of this book. Deeply moved by the Depression and the suffering it had caused; convinced that the economic and social system of the country had been broken beyond repair, that those who had held the chief economic power before 1929 had been proved derelict and unworthy, and that action was desperately needed to set things right; wrung by compassion for the victims of economic unbalance, these men and women no longer set such store as formerly upon art as art. They wanted it to have a social function, to illuminate the social scene, to bring its darkest places clearly into view. "What's the use of being a connoisseur of the arts when people are starving?" cried a New York woman of means who had prided herself on her judicious purchases of modern paintings; "I feel as if I'd been wasting my money." "What's the use of writing pretty novels about ladies and gentlemen?" thought the young fiction-writers of 1935. "If we write about the sharecroppers we're getting at the sort of thing that matters—and we may accomplish something."

To understand the thrust of American literature during the nineteen-thirties one must realize how strong was this mood of social evangelism among writers and critics and the intellectual élite generally.

§ 2

At this point careful qualification is necessary. The new mood was most widespread in New York, which had long been the center of intellectual ferment in the United States and an extremely sensitive barometer of the pressure of new and radical ideas. It was more widespread among the young and rising—and frequently jobless—intellectuals than among the older and better-established. Many successful practitioners of the craft of writing to sell were quite untouched by it. It was not strikingly prevalent among well-to-do “nice people” of culture who had always been surrounded with books and had always subscribed to the more decorous magazines, or among academic gentry remote from the fever of new creative effort in the arts. It was likely to bewilder and perhaps frighten the clubwoman who enjoyed literary lectures and wanted to beautify her town and subscribed to all the best concerts and belonged to the Book-of-the-Month Club. As for the banker who was a college trustee and helped to make up the annual deficit of the symphony concerts and had every right to be considered a sustainer of the arts, he was likely to be angered by it—if indeed he was aware of it at all.

Now and again some expression of the mood leaped into wide popularity. There was, for example, the play “Tobacco Road,” written by Jack Kirkland from a novel by Erskine Caldwell. Produced in New York on December 4, 1935 (just as Prohibition gave way to Repeal), this study of a poverty-stricken and depraved Southern tenant family seemed at first about to fail but gradually found its public and, to the amazement of Broadway, ran on and on, year after year, until by the autumn of 1939 it had easily broken the phenomenal record for successive New York performances set by “Abie’s Irish Rose” in the nineteen-twenties. Undoubt-

edly the success of "Tobacco Road" was due in part to its frank and profane dialogue, its exhibitions of uninhibited love-making, and James Barton's fine gift for both comic and tragic effects as Jeeter Lester; but at least the success was not prevented by the fact that the play showed relentlessly and compassionately the interworking of poverty and degeneracy—showed it without blinking the fact that the Lesters had become a dirty, irresponsible, mentally defective, disreputable family.

Another quite different embodiment of the mood was the musical revue "Pins and Needles," produced on November 27, 1937, by Labor Stage, Inc., a company of garment workers (of which no actor was paid more than \$55 a week). This revue likewise went on and on until late in 1939 it had broken all previous musical-show endurance records. Playfully pleading the cause of the labor unions and satirizing their enemies, "Pins and Needles" was different from anything previously seen on the musical stage. Who would have imagined, in the nineteen-twenties, that a revue would run for years whose catchiest air was called "Sing Me a Song of Social Significance"?

Only one or two books which could fairly be said to reflect the mood of social consciousness reached the top of the best-seller list during the nineteen-thirties. One was Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*, published late in 1935, which showed how fascism might come to the United States. A still better example was John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, a very vivid and finely wrought account of the plight of a family of migrant "Okies" in California, which not only met with thunders of critical applause when it appeared early in 1939 but jumped at one bound to the top of the list. Here, even more than in "Tobacco Road," the components of the young intellectuals' credo were brought together: a sense of the way in which economic and social forces worked together to bring tragedy to innocent people; a deep sym-

pathy for those people, combined with a willingness to reveal all their ignorance, their casual carnality, their inability to understand their own plight; a sense of the splendor of America, its exciting challenge to artist and to social engineer alike; and a resolve to arouse an indifferent public by showing the worst in poverty and cruelty that America could offer.

Otherwise an examination of the annual best-seller lists would seem to suggest how limited in size was the public which wanted social documents. To command the attention of two or three hundred thousand readers in its original full-price edition, a book succeeded best by addressing itself to other impulses.

There was, for example, the desire to escape from the here and now of Depression and anxiety. May not *The Good Earth*, by Pearl S. Buck, which led the fiction list in 1931 and 1932, have had an additional appeal because it took its readers away to China? May not the appearance of *The Fountain*, by Charles Morgan, on the best-seller list for 1932 have been partly due to the fact that it told of a man who escaped from the outward world of ugly circumstance into a world of inward reflection? Surely the success of *Shadows on the Rock*, by Willa Cather (1931), the even greater success of *Anthony Adverse*, by Hervey Allen (which led all comers in 1933 and 1934), and the superlative success of *Gone with the Wind*, by Margaret Mitchell (which was the overwhelming favorite in 1936 and 1937)—to say nothing of Stark Young's *So Red the Rose* (1934), Kenneth Roberts's *Northwest Passage* (1937), and a number of other books, was the greater because they offered an escape into history. For a time the likeliest recipe for publishing profits was to produce an 800-page romance in old-time costume.

Indeed, it is possible that *The Grapes of Wrath*, if it had appeared a few years earlier, would not have been the big popular hit that it was in 1939. It would have seemed to

many readers too painful, too disturbing. By 1939 they had become accustomed to unemployment—even complacent about it—and had acquired new worries to be diverted from (Hitler and the threat of war). They could now take the Steinbeck medicine with less flinching.

There were suggestions of other moods, too, in the best-seller lists. The fact that *The Strange Death of President Harding* in 1930 and *Washington Merry-Go-Round* in 1931 both stood high may be regarded as an indication of the growing public disillusionment with the government as the Hoover Administration battled vainly with the Depression. *The Epic of America*, best-selling non-fiction book of 1932, may have appealed to a mood of inquiry into the background and traditions of a nation which could get itself into such a fix. When the economic tide turned in 1933, what more natural than that men and women whose dreams of a career had been thwarted by the Depression and who now began to hope that they could make a second start should have rushed to buy *Life Begins at Forty* by Walter B. Pitkin (first on the non-fiction list in 1933, second in 1934)?

Americans have always wanted guideposts to personal success and the more rewarding life, and it might be pushing inference too far to suggest that the big sales of *Live Alone and Like It* by Marjorie Hillis in 1936, *Wake Up and Live* by Dorothea Brande in 1936, and *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie in 1937 had any close relation to the state of business, or that the rise of *The Importance of Living*, by Lin Yutang, to the top of the list in 1938 was a sign that during the business Recession there was once more a wish to learn how to be happy by denying the need for worldly advancement. But the popularity of Vincent Sheean's *Personal History* (1935), Negley Farson's *Way of a Transgressor* (1936), John Gunther's *Inside Europe* and *Inside Asia* (1936 and 1939), and other books on foreign affairs (not to mention *It Can't Happen Here*), surely re-



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ROOSEVELT RIDES IN TRIUMPH

Returning with Mrs. Roosevelt from the rainy Inauguration of
January 20, 1937



Otto F. Hess

BENNY GOODMAN IN ACTION

At a "Battle of Swing" at the Savoy Ballroom, Harlem, New York City

flected the rising excitement over the news from Europe as the Nazis and fascists advanced through crisis after crisis to ever greater power.

Some books during the decade rode high with the aid of very special circumstances. The best-selling non-fiction book of 1934 was Alexander Woollcott's *While Rome Burns*, a collection of anecdotes and whimsies which would hardly have fared so well had its author not invented a new sort of radio program well adapted to the intelligence of bookish people, and had he not been delighting huge audiences on the air by collecting old poems and old eyeglasses, telling stories about Katharine Cornell, and extolling Kipling, Harpo Marx, Laura E. Richards, and the wonderful dogs of the Seeing Eye. (To Mr. Woollcott's audible enthusiasm was also due in no small measure the success of *Goodbye Mr. Chips*.) *North to the Orient* (1935) and *Listen, the Wind* (1938) sold in great volume not simply because they were exquisitely written but also, perhaps, because Anne Morrow Lindbergh was the wife of an idolized hero and was admired in her own right. No correlation between the successful books of any given period and the general trend of opinion and taste during that period can be pushed far: there is always a vast diversity of talent among the writers, a vast diversity of taste among the readers, and an element of chance in the whole process. For example, throughout most of the decade there was an undeniable public interest in economic problems and a considerable sale of economic treatises. Yet no book on the economic condition of America got to the top of the best-seller list, although there were big sales for *100,000,000 Guinea Pigs* (a diatribe for consumers on the difference between what they thought they were buying and what the manufacturers were actually selling them) and fairly big sales for several of Stuart Chase's lively simplifications of the economic dilemma. Perhaps economics

was, after all, the dismal science—or, let us say, the dismal area of disagreement, assumption, and conjecture.

§ 3

Limited in size as were their audiences, the writers who were engaged in the search for social significance produced perhaps the most vital and certainly the most characteristic work of the decade. John Dos Passos with his *U.S.A.* trilogy, in which he suggested the hollowness and wastefulness of pre-Depression American life, interlarding his passages of fiction with impressionistic portraits of famous Americans (in which, of course, J. P. Morgan was roundly condemned, Woodrow Wilson sharply satirized, and Thorstein Veblen extolled), and closing the trilogy with a word-picture of an unemployed man trying hopelessly to thumb his way down a fine American highway; Erskine Caldwell packing his pages with the cruelty and misery of the lower ranges of Southern life; Ernest Hemingway trying (not very successfully) to make a proletarian lesson out of the story of Harry Morgan, a disreputable Key West rumrunner; James T. Farrell showing how environment got the best of Studs Lonigan, a lower-middle-class Irish Catholic boy of Chicago; Albert Halper presenting the factory workers of *The Foundry*; Robert Cantwell dealing with striking fruit pickers; and John Steinbeck later following the Joads from drought-ridden Oklahoma to vigilante-ridden California—these and others like Fielding Burke and Grace Lumpkin were the pace-setters for the period in fiction (though of course there were very able novels produced by writers of different intent, such as Thomas Wolfe, Pearl Buck, Ellen Glasgow, Margaret Mitchell, and William Faulkner). Even Sinclair Lewis engaged in the politico-social battle, though not on the side of rebellion; in *The Prodigal Parents* his effort was to show that the Babbitt whom he had once satirized was a

kindlier and better man than the youngsters of the radical left.

Among the poets, Archibald MacLeish and Edna St. Vincent Millay were turning likewise to political and social themes; Carl Sandburg was writing

Stocks are property, yes.
Bonds are property, yes.
Machines, land, buildings are property, yes.
A job is property,
no, nix, nah, nah.

and numerous younger men and women were struggling with the almost impossible task of writing sagas and songs of the masses in idioms intelligible only to those who had learned to follow the abstruse indirections of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.

In the theatre, Clifford Odets made energetic use of proletarian themes; Maxwell Anderson, in "Winterset," turned social injustice to the uses of poetic tragedy; as the decade grew older and fascism became more menacing, Robert E. Sherwood epitomized the democratic faith in his moving tableaux from the life of "Abe Lincoln in Illinois"; the Federal players dramatized current politics in "Triple A Plowed Under" and "One Third of a Nation."

At the same time ardent historians and literary sociologists were bringing out harsh biographies of the robber barons and Mellons and Morgans of the American past; delving into aspects of the history of American cities and regions which had been carefully neglected by chambers of commerce; taking to pieces the life of American communities and assembling their findings in statistical and graphic profusion. With more amiable intent, the Writers' Project of the WPA was going over the country inch by inch for a series of guidebooks. Surveys supported by the Federal government or by foundations were analyzing every public

problem in exhaustive detail. The nineteen-thirties were a golden age of literary sociology. America had discovered itself to be a fascinating subject for exploration, dissection, and horrified but hopeful contemplation.

§ 4

At the heart of the literary revolt against the America that had been stood the communist intellectuals. Numerically they were hardly important, but from them the revolt caught the fire of burning conviction, and from the curious nature of the communist position it derived most of its weaknesses. Many an author was handicapped by his conviction that, as a Marxian, he must take for his hero a kind of American he did not really know, or that he must make his characters conform to a Marxian pattern and argue the Marxian case, or that he must depict his proletarians both as men rendered cruel and vicious by their lot and as the heroic standard-bearers of a glorious revolution, or that he must present anybody with more than \$3,000 a year only in caricature, or that he must preach a collective uniformity which ran counter to his own natural instinctive preference for individual dissent. Especially in the early years of the decade, the Marxian pattern was a strait jacket into which American literature could not readily be fitted. As Malcolm Cowley has remarked, in those early years at least six novels and two plays were based on a single actual strike (at Gastonia in 1929), and "strike novels began to follow a pattern almost as rigid and conventional as that of a Petrarchan sonnet. The hero was usually a young worker, honest, naïve and politically undeveloped. Through intolerable mistreatment, he was driven to take part in a strike. Always the strike was ruthlessly suppressed, and usually its leader was killed. But the young worker, conscious now of the mission that united him to the whole working class, marched on

toward new battles." (Later, especially after the communists accepted the idea of the Popular Front, the bonds of doctrine became progressively less constricting.)

The truth was that many of the young rebels had embraced—or at least dallied with—communism chiefly because they saw it as the end-station of the road of disillusionment. First one saw that the going order was not working right; then one progressed to the consideration of reforms, one read *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens*, and decided that half-measures would not suffice to redeem America; one went on to the idea that nothing short of revolution would serve; and there at the terminus of one's journey sat Karl Marx waiting to ask one's unquestioning devotion, there was the Communist Party promising to make a clean sweep of all that was hateful in American life. How welcome to find the end of the road, how easy to be able to ascribe everything one disliked to capitalism! (Did not Robert Forsythe, in *Redder Than the Rose*, a book of left-wing comment which succeeded in being both vehement and humorous, argue that Dillinger was a product of capitalism, that the vulgarities of the Hauptmann trial were American capitalism's "own narcotic to deaden its death pains," that Mae West showed "in her frank cynical way the depths to which capitalistic morality has come"?) Yet how hard, nevertheless, to swallow the belief that any deceit was justified by the cause—even if the cause appealed to one's most generous instincts—and to follow unquestioningly the twists and turns of the Moscow party line, now damning Roosevelt as the best friend of the rich, now embracing him as a partner in the Popular Front!

During the latter nineteen-thirties there appeared a crop of autobiographies full of nostalgic memories of the Bohemian Greenwich Village of the early nineteen-hundreds, when young intellectuals were manning the silk strikers' picket lines, seeing Big Bill Haywood plain, cheering for

the Armory Show of independent art, and experimenting with free verse and free love. Perhaps the day would come when a new crop of autobiographies would recall the dear dead days of the nineteen-thirties when the young rebels saw themselves as soldiers in the class war, regarded Union Square as their G.H.Q., debated endlessly about "ideology," were lashed into their wildest furies of controversy over the "trial" of Trotsky in Mexico City, and were heartened every day by the knowledge that as capitalism withered, communism was inevitably rising to take its place.

§ 5

Through the ranks of the painters, too, swept the contagion of social concern and of enthusiasm for putting American life on record. Thomas H. Benton's muscular and turbulent groups, Grant Wood's formalized Midwestern landscapes and satirical portraits, John Stuart Curry's scenes of farm life on the plains, Charles Burchfield's gaunt mansions of the Rutherford B. Hayes era, Edward Hopper's grim streets and cool New England lighthouses, Reginald Marsh's pageants of New York slum life attracted many disciples. The Federal government, wisely including artists among its relief beneficiaries, put scores of them to work painting murals on post-office walls; and presently the young painter's model found that she was no longer simply to lie on a couch while he experimented with the treatment of planes of color and bulges of significant form, but was to strike a pose as a pioneer mother or embody the spirit of America insisting upon slum clearance. The value of the new trend was debatable, but at least it promised to decrease the wide gap between the artist and the general public, which at last began to feel that it knew what was going on. Simultaneously there was a sharp increase in the number of young people who, at places like the School of Fine Arts

of the University of Iowa, were actually learning to paint; and there, too, was hope for the future of American art.

Not altogether unrelated to this change in emphasis in American painting, perhaps, was the rise to sudden popularity of an art hitherto seldom regarded with serious attention—the art of photography. It rose on the crest of a camera craze of remarkable dimensions—a craze which otherwise served chiefly as a new and amusing hobby, with aesthetic values and satisfactions thrown in for good measure.

During the early years of the Depression one began to notice, here and there, young men with what appeared to be leather-cased opera glasses slung about their necks. They were the pioneers of the camera craze who had discovered that the Leicas and other tiny German cameras, which took postage-stamp-size pictures capable of enlargement, combined a speed, a depth of focus, and an ability to do their work in dim light which opened all sorts of new opportunities to the photographer. The number of "candid camera" addicts grew rapidly as the experts showed how easily an executive committee or a table-full of night-club patrons might be shot sitting. During the eight years from 1928 to 1936 the importation into America of cameras and parts thereof—chiefly from Germany—increased over five-fold despite the Depression.

By 1935 and 1936 the American camera manufacturers and the photographic supply shops found their business booming. Candid cameras were everywhere, until before long prominent citizens became accustomed to having young men and women suddenly rise up before them at public events, lift little cameras to one eye, and snap them—of course without permission. At intermissions during theatrical openings and gala concerts the aisles would sometimes be full of camera sharpshooters. Schoolboys were pleading with their parents for enlargers and exposure-meters. Camera exhibitions were attracting unprecedented crowds.

During the two years 1935-37 the production of cameras in the United States jumped 157 per cent—from less than five million dollars' worth in 1935 to nearly twelve and a half million dollars' worth in 1937. An annual collection of distinguished photographic work, *U. S. Camera*, became a best-seller. A flock of new picture magazines appeared and a few of these jumped to wide popularity, led by the more dignified *Life* and the less dignified *Look*. One had only to lay *U. S. Camera* beside the camera magazines of a few years before, with their fancy studies of young women in Greek draperies holding urns, their deliberately blurred views of sailboats with rippled reflections, and their sentimental depictions of cute babies, to realize how this art had grown in range, imagination, and brilliance.

Some of the new photographers centered their interest upon snapping friends and relatives (including, of course, their children) and immortalizing their travels; some of them tried to capture the sentimental loveliness of scenes that they had enjoyed; and some went on to experiment in the making of abstract patterns of light and shade. But a great many others found themselves becoming unsentimental reporters—of events, of the social scene, even of the uglier parts of the social scene. Able professionals like Margaret Bourke-White, like Dorothea Lange of the Farm Security Administration, like Walker Evans, often worked with the same sort of sociological enthusiasm that had caught the young novelists and was here and there catching the young painters. When S. T. Williamson, reviewing for the *New York Times* a book of Walker Evans's uncompromising pictures (brought out by the Museum of Modern Art in 1938), denied that Mr. Evans had revealed the physiognomy of America and insisted that it would be "nearer the mark to say that bumps, warts, boils, and blackheads are here," he was saying the sort of thing that might be said about half the novels written by the devotees of social sig-

nificance. What was significant about this aspect of the camera craze was that photographers like Mr. Evans with their grim portrayals of dismal streets, tattered billboards, and gaunt, sad-eyed farm women, were teaching the amateur—whose name was legion—that the camera need not necessarily be shut up in its case until a beauty spot was reached, that there was excitement in catching characteristic glimpses even of the superficially ugly manifestations of life, that these too could be made beautiful in their way, and that when one began to see the everyday things about one with the eye of an artist who was simultaneously a reporter or a sociologist, one began to understand them.

§ 6

One morning in the winter of 1937-38 a crowd began to gather outside the Paramount Theatre in Times Square, New York, as soon as it was light. By 6 A. M. there were three thousand people assembled in the otherwise empty streets—mostly high-school boys and girls in windbreakers and leather jackets. By 7:30 the crowd had so swelled that ten mounted policemen were sent from the West 47th Street station to keep it under control. At 8 o'clock the doors of the theatre were carefully opened to admit 3,634 boys and girls; then the fire department ordered the doors closed, leaving two or three thousand youngsters out in the cold.

Benny Goodman and his orchestra were opening an engagement at the Paramount. Benny Goodman was the King of Swing, and these boys and girls were devotees of swing, ready to dance in the aisles of the theatre amid shouts of "Get off, Benny! Swing it!" and "Feed it to me, Gene! Send me down!" They were jitterbugs, otherwise "alligators," equipped with the new vocabulary of swing ("in the groove," "spank the skin," "schmaltz," "boogie-woogie," "jam session," "killer-diller," and so on endlessly); members of that

army of young swing enthusiasts all over the country who during the next year or two knew the names and reputations of the chief band leaders and instrumentalists of swingdom—Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, Artie Shaw, Gene Krupa, "Count" Basie, Teddy Wilson, Louis Armstrong, Jack Teagarden, Larry Clinton, and others without number—as a seasoned baseball fan knows his professional ball players.

To trace fully the origins of this craze one would have to go back very far. Suffice it to say here that during the nineteen-twenties, the jazz craze—which had begun long before in the honky-tonks of New Orleans and had burst into general popularity with the success of "Alexander's Ragtime Band" and the rising vogue of the one-step and fox-trot as dances between 1911 and 1916—had become tamed into decorum and formality; but that even during this time there were obscure jazz bands, mostly of Negro players, which indulged in a mad improvisation, superimposing upon the main theme of the dance music they were playing their own instrumental patterns made up on the spur of the moment (and sometimes later committed to writing). During the early years of the Depression there was little popular interest in this "hot jazz" in the United States; what a worried public wanted was "sweet" music, slow in rhythm and soothingly melodious, like "Some Day I'll Find You" (1931) and "Star Dust" (very popular in 1932), or poignantly haunting, like "Night and Day" (1932) and "Stormy Weather" (1933). But Europe had acquired a belated enthusiasm for jazz rhythms and in France there grew up something of a cult of "le jazz hot." Phonograph records of the playing of such experts as Louis Armstrong and his band sold well abroad. In the fall of 1933—at about the time of the NRA parades and the coming of Repeal—an English company arranged with a young New Yorker who was crazy about hot jazz to try to get some good records made by a band of American whites; and young John Henry Hammond, Jr., persuaded

the scholarly-looking clarinetist, Benny Goodman, who was playing in a radio orchestra, to gather a group of players for this purpose.

The resulting records not only sold well in England but made an unexpected hit in the United States; and thus began a public enthusiasm for "swing"—as the hot jazz full of improvisation came to be called—which welled to its climax in the winter of 1937-38, when the bespectacled Mr. Goodman, playing at the Paramount and later in Boston and elsewhere, found that the boys and girls so yelled and screamed and cavorted when his band began to "send" that a concert became a bedlam. When in the spring of 1938 a Carnival of Swing was held at Randall's Island in New York, with twenty-five bands present, over 23,000 jitterbugs listened for five hours and forty-five minutes with such uncontrollable enthusiasm that, as a reporter put it in the next morning's *Times*, the police and park officers had all they could do to protect the players from "destruction by admiration."

Among many of the jitterbugs—particularly among many of the boys and girls—the appreciation of the new music was largely vertebral. A good swing band smashing away at full speed, with the trumpeters and clarinetists rising in turn under the spotlight to embroider the theme with their several furious improvisations and the drummers going into long-drawn-out rhythmical frenzies, could reduce its less inhibited auditors to sheer emotional vibration, punctuated by howls of rapture. Yet to dismiss the swing craze as a pure orgy of sensation would be to miss more than half of its significance. For what the good bands produced—though it might sound to the unpracticed ear like a mere blare of discordant noise—was an extremely complex and subtle pattern, a full appreciation of which demanded far more musical sophistication than the simpler popular airs of a preceding period. The true swing enthusiasts, who collected

records to the limit of their means and not only liked Artie Shaw's rendering of "Begin the Beguine" but knew precisely why they liked it, were receiving no mean musical education; and if Benny Goodman could turn readily from the playing of "Don't Be That Way" to the playing of Mozart, so could many of his hearers turn to the hearing of Mozart. It may not have been quite accidental that the craze for swing accompanied the sharpest gain in musical knowledge and musical taste that the American people had ever achieved.

This great gain in the appreciation of good music was one of the most remarkable phenomena of the nineteen-thirties. Some credit for it belongs to the WPA, which, doing valiant work in music as in literature and the theatre and the plastic arts, not only offered music classes and other aids to the potentially musical, but maintained no less than 36 symphony orchestras. But the chief credit probably must go to the radio, which had been demonstrating the ancient truth that if you throw at people enough of the products of any art, good, bad, and indifferent, some of these people will in time learn to prefer the good.

For a long time the radio had been spilling into the ears of millions of Americans an almost continuous stream of music of all sorts, mostly trite. At the beginning of the nineteen-thirties it was still accepted as axiomatic by most radio people—and particularly by those business executives whose task it was to approve the programs devised by advertising agencies to promote the sale of their goods—that good music was not widely wanted. Long before this, however, the broadcasting companies had been experimenting with putting music of high quality on the air, partly for the sake of prestige, partly to convince the people who wanted the radio to be more educational that the radio companies themselves were hot for culture. The National Broadcasting Company had put on the New York Symphony Orchestra

as early as 1926, the Boston Symphony in 1927, the Philadelphia in 1929. By 1929 the Philadelphia Orchestra program had actually secured an advertising sponsor: Philco took the plunge. In 1930 the Columbia Broadcasting System began a series of concerts of the New York Philharmonic on Sunday afternoons, and the next year the NBC began putting the Metropolitan Opera on the air on Saturday afternoons. Before long the opera broadcast, too, acquired sponsors: a cigarette company and a mouth-wash company signified their willingness to pay for it if only a few well chosen words about the advantages of the right sort of smoke or gargle might accompany the works of Wagner and Puccini. What was happening was that these classical programs were obviously attracting listeners and more listeners.

So the movement swept on until on the first day of February, 1937—just a little while before President Roosevelt brought out his plan for the enlargement of the Supreme Court—an emissary of David Sarnoff of the National Broadcasting Company, calling upon Arturo Toscanini in his native Milan, told him that the NBC wanted him to conduct a radio orchestra the following winter.

"Did you ever hear of the NBC?" the emissary, Samuel Chotzinoff, is said to have begun.

"No," replied Toscanini.

Some explanation was required; and then Chotzinoff handed over a memorandum which suggested several alternative plans for Toscanini concerts on the air. The great conductor peered at it nearsightedly, ran his finger down the list, and presently stopped.

"I'll do this," said he. He was pointing at a suggestion of a concert a week for ten weeks.

He did it—with an orchestra especially recruited to do him justice. When, at Christmas time of 1937, he stepped upon the podium in the biggest broadcasting studio in the NBC Building in New York, facing a visible audience of a

thousand or so men and women (equipped with satin programs guaranteed not to make crackling noises) and an invisible audience of millions more at their radios all over the country, it was clear that a milestone had been reached. Things had come to the point where the huge radio public was ready to be given the best that could be got, and given it direct—not simply granted a chance to overhear what was intended in the first place for the musically elect.

The remarkable rise in American musical appreciation may best be measured, perhaps, by citing a few figures collected by Dickson Skinner in *Harper's Magazine* in the spring of 1939. Here they are:—

In 1915 or thereabouts there had been 17 symphony orchestras in the United States. By 1939 there were over 270.

It was estimated that in 1938-39 the combined audiences on the air for the Metropolitan Opera on Saturday afternoon, the NBC symphony on Saturday evening, and the New York Philharmonic and Ford hour on Sunday, numbered 10,230,000 families *each week*. (Figure for yourself how many families had been able—and willing—to hear music of such calibre before 1930.)

As evidence that these audiences were increasing, it was estimated by the Coöperative Analysis of Broadcasting that the audience for the Ford Sunday evening hour, offering the Detroit Symphony, was 118 per cent larger in 1937 than in 1935; and that by 1938 it was fifth among all radio programs in national popularity, being exceeded only by the news broadcast and by three other commercial programs.

The NBC Music Appreciation Hour, conducted by Walter Damrosch, was being heard each week in 1938 by more than seven million children in some 70,000 schools—and probably by three or four million adults also.

And finally, during 1938, broadcasts of symphony orchestras and of grand opera were being carried by the two NBC networks at a rate which averaged more than an hour a day.

After reciting these statistics, it would seem hardly neces-

sary to add that the biggest phonograph company reported that its sales of records increased 600 per cent in the five years 1933-38. The phonograph, once threatened with virtual extinction by the radio, had come into its own again, not only because of the swing craze but even more importantly because of the widespread desire to hear "classical" music of one's own choice without having to wait till a radio orchestra got round to playing it.

Thus far very little benefit from the growth of this huge audience had come to American composers. But that time would presumably arrive before long. For the testimony of concert performers who found that their audiences now wanted not simply the old sure-fire favorites, but the less familiar symphonies and concertos; the number of school and college glee clubs that now preferred to sing valid music; the growing number of listeners to Station WQXR in New York, which specialized in good music; the demeanor of the crowds who came to such music festivals as that held each summer in the Berkshires: these were among the accumulating fragments of evidence that a great American musical public of real discrimination was being built up.

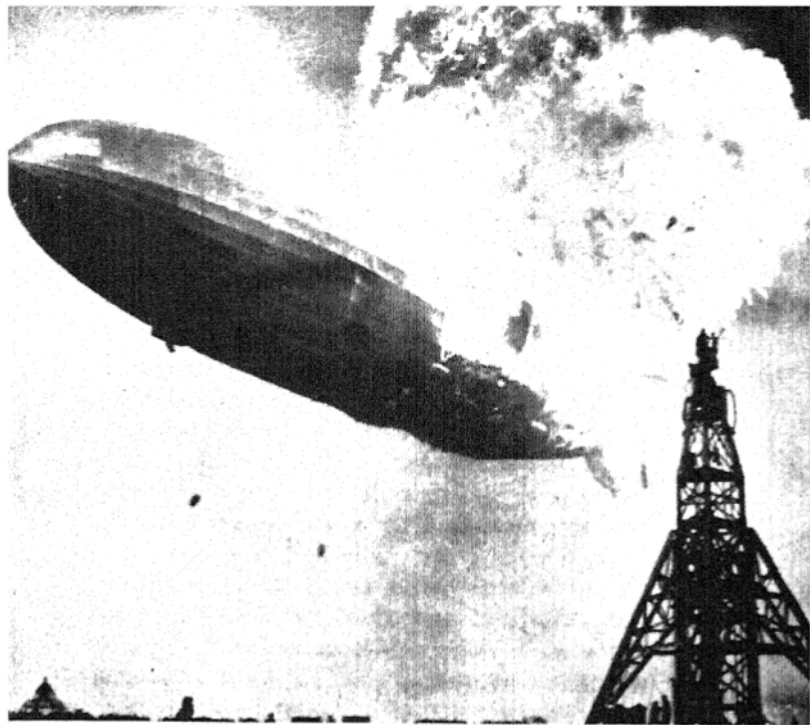
§ 7

One does not expect a piece of music to carry a political or economic message, but one might well expect newspapers, magazines, the radio, and the movies to do so. These were the chief agencies of day-to-day adult instruction and entertainment, reaching audiences vastly bigger than even the most popular book or play could command. What was their function in the struggle over the future of America?

Inevitably the influence of the newspapers tended to be conservative. Newspaper publishing had become a branch of big business, obedient to the economic law which concentrated power into fewer and fewer hands. Although the tend-

ency of newspapers to be combined into chains under a single ownership seemed to have been halted during the nineteen-thirties (during the latter years the Hearst chain actually showed signs of weakening), the tendency toward monopoly or duopoly of newspaper control in each city but the very largest continued. By 1938 a number of good-sized American cities—such as Denver, Des Moines, Grand Rapids, Hartford, Louisville, Memphis, Nashville, Omaha, Toledo, and St. Paul—had each only one morning and one afternoon paper; several of the biggest cities—Baltimore, Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Kansas City, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Seattle—had only one morning and two afternoon papers; and in three of these latter cities the one morning paper was under the same ownership as one of the two afternoon papers. So complex and expensive an enterprise did a city newspaper have to be to survive that its controlling owners were perforce capitalists on a considerable scale, and their influence was likely to be exerted on behalf of property rights, of big business, and of the interests of important advertisers.

Not that the newspaper editors and reporters were conservative by preference. Many if not most of these, in fact, were aggressive supporters of the underdog. Indeed, the decrease in the number of newspapers, the increasing use of syndicated material, and the drastic economies required by the Depression had thrown so many newspaper men out on the street that what had once been hopefully spoken of as the "profession of journalism" had become one of the most crowded and ill-paid of all white-collar occupations, and the reporter might well regard *himself* as an underdog. Out of these circumstances emerged such anomalies as newspapers whose editors and reporters were mostly New Dealers (or even communists) and members of the Newspaper Guild affiliated with the CIO, yet whose editorial pages warred fiercely against Roosevelt and whose news columns were



Pictures, Inc.

THE HINDENBURG BURSTS INTO FLAME

This photograph was taken just as the fire broke out while the dirigible was approaching her mooring mast at Lakehurst, N. J., at dusk on May 6, 1937



Pictures, Inc.

THE SOUTH CHICAGO "RIOT," MEMORIAL DAY, 1937

Police routing a picket-line outside the Republic Steel plant in the Little Steel strike: 10 dead, 90 wounded

"slanted" against labor. Where the tradition of factual, objective reporting was strong, as on the *New York Times*, the slanting was only minor and occasional; where this tradition was weaker, as on the *Chicago Tribune*, it was sharp.

But if the newspapers tended toward conservatism, at least they did not tend toward evasion of political and economic issues. One of the most striking phenomena of the decade was the rising importance of the political columnist whose writings were syndicated all over the country and whose audiences were numbered by the millions. The readers of a small-city newspaper might find on their breakfast tables not only the advice of Dorothy Dix on affairs of the heart, the gossip of Walter Winchell, the Broadway talk of O. O. McIntyre, but also the opinions on national affairs of people like Walter Lippmann, David Lawrence, Frank Kent, Dorothy Thompson, Drew Pearson and Robert S. Allen, and Westbrook Pegler (and also Eleanor Roosevelt, whose "My Day" seldom touched national issues directly but had an indirectly persuasive effect). Being permitted usually more latitude of expression than a local editor, these syndicated columnists—who incidentally were mostly conservative—became national oracles. When Walter Lippmann turned against the New Deal he carried thousands of readers with him; when Westbrook Pegler took issue with a political adversary, people from coast to coast watched the fur fly. Lippmann in 1932, Dorothy Thompson in 1937, were among the most influential of all Americans. Strange that the old tradition of personal journalism, so nearly killed by the transformation of the American newspaper into a standardized corporated entity, should thus reassert itself on the grand scale!

In the magazine world—if one excepts such liberal weeklies of small circulation as the *New Republic* and the *Nation* and such organs of the solid intellectuals as *Harper's*—the tendency was toward a very timid discretion in the

treatment of public affairs. This discretion was relaxed somewhat in 1932 and 1933, when readers clamored to know what was wrong with the management of American business and the upholders of the status quo were too bewildered to offer confident resistance, but reasserted itself after the New Deal Honeymoon. Among the big popular magazines with circulations of two or three million the only sort of militancy likely to be manifest thereafter was a militancy such as that of George Horace Lorimer of the *Saturday Evening Post*, who risked considerable losses in circulation (but, of course, few losses in advertising) by his incessant hammering at the Roosevelt Administration. Otherwise these magazines—particularly the women's magazines—touched controversial issues timidly if at all and confined themselves mostly to highly expert fictional entertainment and to the discussion of matters to which neither their owners, their advertisers, nor their more tender-minded readers could conceivably take exception. When an attempt was made to provide, in *Ken*, a liberal-radical periodical of large circulation, advertisers held off and thus condemned it to an early death. But on the whole it would be inexact to say that direct pressure from advertisers affected very largely the policy of the successful big-circulation magazines. What chiefly affected them was the desire of their owners to see their own opinions echoed, to make money by pleasing and flattering their advertisers, and at the same time to provide agreeable and innocuous entertainment.

That there was money to be made nevertheless by the sharp presentation of facts, and particularly of facts about America, was shown by the growing success of *Time*—an expertly edited, newsy, and withal irreverent (though not at all radical) weekly—and its younger sister *Fortune* (founded in 1930), which although edited by liberals for the benefit chiefly of the rich, developed such a brilliant

technic of team-research and team-authorship and trimmed its sails so skillfully to the winds of conservatism that it not only became a mine of factual material for future historians but subtly broadened reactionary minds. None of the other periodical successes of the decade promised to have so acute an effect upon the status of the writer as this adventure in writing a magazine inside the office; there were those who saw in it a threat of extinction to the free-lance journalist, a threat of the coming of the day when the magazine writer would have to look for an office job or be shut out from publication. (The rise of the *Reader's Digest* to huge popularity appeared to prove chiefly that readers liked to save time, if their reading could be ably condensed and reassuringly simplified; the rise of the picture magazines, led by *Life* and *Look*, proved chiefly that the camera craze had produced enough good photographers to satisfy a public that always liked pictures.) Yet even such new successes as these hardly affected the basic generalization that the way of the popular magazines was the way of evasion and sheer entertainment.

Of radio's coming-of-age during the nineteen-thirties something has already been said. We have noted its contribution to the cause of music. But it developed in other ways also. As a news agency it invaded more and more successfully a field in which the press had stood alone. During the early and middle years of the decade the "commentators" of the air waves became rivals in influence of the political columnists of the press: men like Edwin C. Hill, William Hard, Lowell Thomas, Boake Carter, and H. V. Kaltenborn interpreted national affairs to huge numbers of auditors. Summary, explanation, and interpretation were in demand, especially on the crises in Europe. But personal opinion was likely to be dampened unless safely conservative. The radio commentators added little to the fires of domestic revolt.

Otherwise perhaps the most significant development in radio was the improvement and standardization of the variety show of the air, an hour's or half-hour's program of alternating light music and humorous dialogue, featuring such national favorites as Jack Benny, Rudy Vallee, Fred Allen, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Bing Crosby, and Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy. Throughout most of the decade, unless there was an election, a prize fight, a European crisis, or a Presidential "fireside chat" to demand brief attention, it was the variety shows which commanded the biggest audiences. Their chief rivals for popularity were the numerous serial stories of the air, ranging from Amos 'n' Andy (which reached its biggest number of listeners in 1930 but continued *ad infinitum*) to the Lone Ranger, a wild West thriller, which first was heard on January 30, 1933, and rose in favor until by 1939 it was a three-times-a-week treat to some twenty million people who received it from 140 stations.

Almost without exception both the variety shows and the serials were innocent of any political or economic or social import whatever, save for the announcer's occasional interposition with a suave tribute to the products and policies of the corporation which footed the bill for the entertainment. Charlie McCarthy, for instance, took one into a safe little world of small boys' pranks, a world in which nothing more distressing happened than that Edgar Bergen grew bald, a world in which there were no unemployed men, no budget deficits, no marching dictators. How close were the heroic exploits of the Lone Ranger to observed reality may be suggested by the fact that—according to J. Bryan, III, in the *Saturday Evening Post*—neither Fran Striker, who wrote the innumerable scripts, nor Earle W. Graser, whose voice made "Hi-Yo, Silver!" familiar the country over, had ever been west of Michigan.

§ 8

As for the movies, so completely did they dodge the disensions and controversies of the day—with a few exceptions, such as the March of Time series, the brief newsreels, and an occasional picture like "I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang" or "They Won't Forget"—that if a dozen or two feature pictures, selected at random, were to be shown to an audience of 1960, that audience would probably derive from them not the faintest idea of the ordeal through which the United States went in the nineteen-thirties.

Upon these movies were lavished huge sums of money. For them the stage was robbed of half its ablest actors and playwrights; the literary world, of many of its ablest writers—to say nothing of the engineering and photographic skill which brought to adequacy that cacophonous novelty of 1929, the talking picture, and which toward the end of the decade was bringing more and more pictures in reasonably convincing color. A large number of excellent pictures were produced, with capital acting—whether comedies like "It Happened One Night," or adventure stories like "Mutiny on the Bounty," or historical dramas like "The Life of Emile Zola," or picturizations of fictional classics like "A Tale of Two Cities"; and there was a far greater number of pictures which, whatever their unreality, served as rousing entertainment for an idle evening. But although the secular religion of social consciousness was rampant in Hollywood—especially in 1937 and 1938, when numerous script-writers and actors and technical men were ready to do or die for their guilds, for Tom Mooney, for the Spanish Loyalists, or even for the communist version of the Popular Front—nevertheless in the pictures upon which they worked there was hardly a glimpse of the real America.

The movies took one to a never-never land of adventure and romance uncomplicated by thought.

The capital invested in the movies preferred to steer clear of awkward issues, not to run the risk of offending theatre-goers abroad or at home. The moralists must be placated; as a result of the campaign of the Legion of Decency in 1934, Joseph Breen had been installed in the office of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, ready to censor before production any picture which showed too prolonged a kiss, which showed small boys bathing naked, which permitted a character to say "damn" or "hell." (The immediate effect of the Legion of Decency campaign, oddly enough from the point of view of censorship-haters, appeared to be salutary; it frightened the producers into launching, during 1935 and 1936, some of the best pictures yet seen.) Foreign opinion must be placated lest foreign sales be lost: when "Idiot's Delight" was adapted from stage to screen, it must be set in an anonymous country whose inhabitants spoke not Italian but Esperanto; when "Beau Geste" was refilmed in 1939, the villains of the original silent version must be given Russian names rather than Italian and Belgian names because film trade with Russia was comparatively small. Neither capital nor labor, neither the Administration nor its enemies, must be given any opportunity to criticize. If one wanted to show a crusading reformer, better to make him a Frenchman of the past, like Emile Zola, than an American of the present: for how could an American engage in a crusade without implying that something was wrong?

It was significant that the pre-eminent artist of the motion picture during the nineteen-thirties, Walt Disney, was a maker of fantasies, and that the motion-picture event in January, 1938, which Westbrook Pegler called "the happiest thing that has happened in this world since the armistice" was the production of "Snow White," a fairy story

of the screen. Only in unreality could genius have free rein.

The Disney film was a huge popular success; it set the whole country humming "Heigh-ho" and "Whistle While You Work" and incidentally was a godsend to the toy business: during the bleak first third of 1938, when the Recession was at its worst, over \$3,000,000 worth of Disney toys were sold, and that summer, when the wheels of most factories were turning intermittently, the Sieberling-Latex plant near Akron was three weeks behind orders (after running 24 hours a day for months)—making rubber statuettes of Dopey and the other dwarfs!

Not merely did the movies avoid temptations to thought about the condition of the country; in effect their producers played, half unwittingly, a gigantic joke upon the social salvationists, and particularly upon those men and women who would have liked to make the American masses class conscious. For the America which the movies portrayed—like the America of popular magazine fiction and especially of the magazine advertisements—was devoid of real poverty or discontent, of any real conflict of interests between owners and workers, of any real ferment of ideas. More than that, it was a country in which almost everybody was rich or about to be rich, and in which the possession of a huge house and a British-accented butler and a private swimming pool not merely raised no embarrassing questions about the distribution of wealth, but was accepted as the normal lot of mankind. So completely did the inveterate movie-goer come to take this America for granted—at least during his two hours in the theatre—that he was unlikely to be surprised to find a couple of stenographers pictured as occupying an apartment with the newest built-in kitchen equipment and a living-room 35 feet long and 20 feet wide; or to hear Bette Davis, in "Dark Victory," expressing satisfaction that she had given up the life in

which she "had had everything" for a life in which she "had nothing"—"nothing," in this case, being a remodeled Vermont farmhouse which (according to the careful computations of E. B. White in *Harper's Magazine*) must have cost at least \$11,000 or \$12,000 a year to live in.

While the writers and artists in whom burned a fierce desire to reveal to their fellow-countrymen the inequalities and miseries of their lot were resolutely addressing a public numbered in the thousands, another public numbering *eighty-five millions each week* was at the movies watching Gary Cooper, Clark Gable, Myrna Loy, Katharine Hepburn, Ronald Colman, Carole Lombard, and the other gods and goddesses of Hollywood disporting themselves in a dreamland of wide-sweeping stairways, marble floors, and magnificent drawing-room vistas. And these eighty-five millions were liking it.

Was not the lesson of all this that America was not—or not yet, if you prefer—proletarian-minded? True, its citizens were capable of organizing hotly to redress wrongs and secure themselves benefits, were quite ready to have these wrongs redressed and these benefits provided by the government if no other agency would do it; and some Americans might even fight, if need be, to get what they wanted. Yet still in the back of their minds there was room for an Horatio Alger paradise where young men of valour rose to the top and young women of glamour married the millionaire's son, and lived happily ever after.