

THE BOURGEOIS PRESS*

THE rubbish you find in second-hand markets tells you of the way people lived yesterday; the advertisements and police items in the newspapers give a good insight into the way people live today. When I say newspapers, I am referring to the modern "organs of public enlightenment" in the "cultural centres" of Europe and America. I consider it just as useful to read the bourgeois press as to listen to the frank things servants have to say about the life of their masters. Diseases cannot, and should not, interest a healthy man, but the doctor is in duty bound to study them. The physician and the journalist have something in common: they both diagnose and describe diseases. Our journalists are in a better position than the bourgeois journalists, for they are well familiar with the general causes of social pathological phenomena. The Soviet journalist should therefore be as attentive toward the testimony of the bourgeois press as the physician is toward the cries and groans of a patient. If some talented person were to come along in our country and gather a sufficient number of facts from the police chronicle of the newspapers of any "cultural centre," and compare these facts with the advertisements of retail stores, restaurants and houses of entertainment, and with the descriptions of gatherings,

* Gorky did not complete this article.

receptions and public celebrations, and if he were to work up all this material, we should get a dazzling and staggering picture of the "cultural" life of present-day bourgeois society.

What do we find daily in the bourgeois press? Here, for instance, are some items it touched upon briefly in the past month of May.

"Reformatory Revolt"—fourteen boys run away from a reformatory, twelve are recaptured by mounted police, the whereabouts of the other two are unknown. "Another Minor Tortured." "Mother Slays Her Childern"—poisons two with gas; motive—starvation. "Another Gas Poisoning"—five asphyxiated: husband, wife, husband's old mother, three-year-old daughter, and baby. "Hunger Drives to Murder." "Another Woman Hacked to Pieces." "Accustomed to Jail"—a man released from prison after serving a five-year sentence goes to the police and says he is sick, cannot work and does not want to beg, and asks to be sent back to jail; the "just laws" of the bourgeois state do not permit this, so, being "accustomed" to jail, the man goes out and smashes a shop window and starts a fight with the police, and in this way gets what he wants. "Millionaire Pauper"—an old beggar, eighty years old, dies, and five million krone are found among his effects. "Lord Ashton, 89, Dies, Leaving £20,000,000." "Monster Trial"—three hundred persons in Lyons die from drinking water from contaminated city mains. "Huge Card Losses." "Several murders were committed yesterday in various parts of the city; the bandits got away safely." The word "safely" in this instance is not to be understood ironically, but as a sign of sympathy with the murderers' luck.

Then there are reports of more or less big cases of fraud, corruption, sexual depravity ending in suicide and murder. Of course, I have enumerated only an insignificant fraction of the items published in the course of the month—ninety per cent of the rest are of a similar criminal and pathological nature. All this is recounted very briefly, tersely and colourlessly; for the journalist to add a little animation or colour to his style, it is necessary for “another woman” to be hacked to pieces with unusually sadistic skill, or that the Düsseldorf murderer, Kürten, a worker, confess to fifty-three crimes and then “suddenly remark drily to the police investigator: ‘What will you say if I now deny everything as just a hoax?’” That is a “sensation.” But the work of the police in the bourgeois countries is becoming a series of sensations, and the case of Kürten should therefore not surprise the Soviet reader. You simply cannot understand why all this is published. The police chronicle evokes no “comment” in the bourgeois press. You feel that it has become commonplace, and that no one is outraged or alarmed by it. Formerly, before the war,* people were outraged. Sentimental individuals used to write milk-and-water articles on the “diseases of the social organism” and voice various sentiments, which were sometimes prompted by alarm, but more often by the irritation of “cultured” people disturbed by “abnormal facts.”

Nowadays the bourgeois press is not interested in the commonplace tragedies of life, for the daily death of tens and hundreds of humble individuals has long become the customary order of things, it has no effect on the tenour

* The war of 1914-18.

of life and constitutes no menace to the people who want to live merrily and tranquilly. Luxurious cinemas are multiplying daily, and, still more luxurious restaurants, with jazz orchestras that shake the walls and ceilings. One is amazed by the abundance of advertisements of specifics against "lowered vitality" and the remarkably eloquent advertisements of venereologists.

But you had this sensational stuff before 1914, you will say. Yes, but it was not so deafening. Now it seems that the bourgeois of the "cultural centres" have unanimously decided that

*Life grows shorter and shorter,
The days speed faster and faster.
Then, let us all our days and nights
Live merrier and merrier!*

This was preached from a cabaret pulpit by a spindle-shanked individual with a protruding stomach, heavily rouged cheeks and the insane eyes of a dope fiend.

I am laying on the colours too thick, you say? I have no desire to do so, because I know that dry rot is contagious. The colours of life are themselves becoming thicker and more lurid. Probably that is because the temperature of life is rising, and because the gaiety of the bourgeoisie is growing feverish. . . . The bourgeoisie tries to live gaily in order to drown a gloomy presentiment of its coming doom.

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I think I know the work of the newspapermen of America and Europe pretty well. In my view they are journeymen, whose arduous and restless trade imbues them

with a feeling of profound indifference to human beings; they very much resemble attendants in a psychiatric hospital, who are accustomed to regard patients and doctors alike as lunatics. This indifference explains the imper- turbably dispassionate tone of their reports on the most diverse facts of life.

Here are some examples:

"A certain Hans Müller yesterday devoured 36 brace of sausages in 11 minutes for a wager."

"In 1928, 9,530 persons—6,690 men and 2,840 women— committed suicide in Prussia; 6,413 of the suicides were urban and 3,117 rural inhabitants."

"The mayor of Löwenberg, Silesia, decided to in- crease the city's revenue by introducing a tax on cats, but the city council turned down the proposal. The mayor has now resorted to a different device. He has traps set at night in the city park for prowling cats. The trapped animals may be redeemed by their owners at a ransom of three marks apiece."

"When bailiffs came to the parish of Niendorf, near Hamburg, to levy property for arrears of payments to the irrigation company, the peasants put up armed resistance and the bailiffs were forced to retire."

A "nocturnal ghost" is in the habit of visiting a pastor living in the vicinity of Berlin. After he had been awak- ened three times by its "indecent touch," he had the police called in. They found a hat under the pastor's window which is presumed to have been lost by the "ghost."

"Should women with bobbed hair be admitted to com- munion? This question was raised by a number of bishops, and was considered by the Vatican on May 24. The

College of Cardinals have answered the question in the affirmative. They do not find the wearing of short hair contrary to Christian morals."

Last year a newspaperman reported that the police figures show that in France about four thousand women disappear every year. Arrests of white slave traffickers were recently made in a number of French cities. The gang had sold 2,500 girls to brothels in the South American republics. A similar organization of traffickers in "human merchandise" operated in Poland. A French journalist, A. Londre, has made a thorough study of this branch of the slave trade. His book, *Criminal Trade*, was put out last year in our country by the Federation Publishing House. It is an extremely interesting book; it tells in detail of the way girls are decoyed and kidnapped, and of their "work" in the brothels of Argentina. But the most instructive thing about this book is that it does not contain a single expression of indignation.

On p. 10, Londre tells of his meeting with a white slave trafficker in the following words:

"Armand is a souteneur. . . . I know what his business is. He knows who I am. He trusts me and I trust him—like businessmen."

Exactly: like businessmen—and nothing more, though the "business" is inhuman and vile enough in all conscience.

But to explain Londre's mentality, it would be appropriate to cite the exact words of an American journalist:

"A policeman is not obliged to think whether the man he is escorting to trial or to jail is innocent or not. I bring

before the court of society the same sort of people, and what has gone before or comes after doesn't concern me."

I heard this in New York in 1906, during a modest scandal staged by pious Americans. I had been driven out of two hotels. So I planted myself with my trunks in the street, and I decided to wait and see what would happen. I was surrounded by reporters, about fifteen of them. In their own, American, way they were good fellows. They "sympathized" with me, and were even, I thought, rather embarrassed by the scandal. One of them was particularly likeable, a hefty chap with a wooden face and comic round beady blue eyes of unusual brilliance. He was a celebrity. He was once commissioned by his paper to Manila, in the Philippines, to arrange the escape from jail of a girl-revolutionary, a nationalist, who had been imprisoned by the Spaniards and who was threatened with the death penalty. This fellow guessed that I was quite willing to let the scandal take its course. He persuaded the young writer, Leroy Scott, author of the novel *The Walking Delegate*, and his comrades of the Five Club to "take a hand in the affair." It later turned out that they could do nothing about it, but I was removed from the street to the "club"—the apartment where the five literary beginners lived in a "commune," and where Scott's wife, a Russian Jewess, was the housewife. The young writers used to gather in the evening in front of the fireplace in the "club's" spacious vestibule. Reporters came, and I talked to them about Russian literature, the Russian revolution, the Moscow insurrection (N. E. Burenin, member of the militant organization of the Bolshevik Central Committee, Scott's wife, and M. F. Andreyeva translated what I said into English).

The newspapermen listened, took notes, and, with a sigh of evident regret, said:

"It's all devilishly interesting—but it's not for our papers."

I asked why their papers could not tell the truth about events which very likely were characteristic of the future of the new age.

But they understood my question in their own simple way, as something purely personal. They said:

"We are all with you, but we can't do anything about it. You will not find or earn money for the revolution here. When the press reported that Roosevelt intended to receive you, the Russian ambassador interfered, and that stops your game. We see that it was not the photograph of Andreyeva the newspapers printed, and we know that your first wife and children are not living in poverty, but it is not in our power to expose it. They won't let you work for the revolution here."

"But why do they let Breshkovskaya?"

To this they did not reply. But they were mistaken: I was able to work, although I did less than I expected. (But that has nothing to do with the subject of this article.)

The journalists went on to acquaint me with the amazing power of the New York press. They gave some illustrations. A rich and influential philanthropical lady was accused by one newspaper of running a number of houses of prostitution. This was a first-class sensation. But a couple of days later this same paper printed the photographs of twenty-five policemen, who, it said, were the real organizers of secret prostitution, and not the highly respected lady in question.

“And what about the policemen?”

“They were dismissed, after having been suitably compensated. They will find jobs in other states.”

Another instance. It was necessary to discredit a certain senator, so the story was printed that he was living on bad terms with his second wife and that his children, students, were at daggers drawn with their stepmother. The old man and his children wrote a denial. The paper printed it, but made a joke of it. The house where he lived was surrounded by reporters. . . .