

By William Saroyan

History and the Hollywood Writers



THE first thing I heard about when I got down there from San Francisco was that an actress who had been very beautiful and very famous two or three years ago had died of a heart attack.

She was 25, and had been through for a year and a half.

The next day I ran into a scenario writer I had gotten drunk with once, and he told me that a friend of his, another scenario writer, had died of a heart attack too. He was older than the actress, 40, and had worked right up to the sad end.

Later, another writer told me this scenario writer's death had grieved him deeply, but it seemed to him that the man had worried too much all the time about the unimportant stuff he was doing, and that the worrying had killed him.

The living writer told me the names of some of the pictures the dead writer had been partly responsible for, and they were all pictures I had seen and forgotten. It didn't seem to either of us that he had had any occasion to worry about them. He had, though, and he'd died.

It was quite a sadness in our lives for a while, although he had lived in sunshine for years, had worn the finest clothes, eaten the best of available food, and dwelt in the finest type of modern house. Even with all that, it was sad because there seemed to be something symbolic, or one might say legendary, or even prophetic, about his exit, his wind-up, his life and death, the fulfilment of his destiny. It seemed an awful pointless destiny to fulfil.

He had worried himself to death over six B pictures, starring three times that many charming, beautiful, handsome, and perhaps not unduly stupid actresses and actors. In gross figures he had been partly responsible for perhaps seven million different people all over the world finding a harmless escape from boredom for from fifty to seventy minutes, during, perhaps, night or day, pleasant weather, unpleasant, rain, snow or storm. At his best, as a human being, a writer, his functioning had been neither outstanding nor unoutstanding.

And when we had had more drinks, toward the end of drinking for the evening, it was felt that he had been a swell guy, a little sad, a little foolish, a little harassed, a little bewildered, with values a little balled up, but always a good guy.

Early in the morning we dismissed him with sorrow, regret, and the agreement that women should be brought into the discussion, more or less for the sake of the living. This was done, and the sorrow, the pathos, the regret, was immeasurably increased. As well as the humour.

It was nothing.

The first day of this visit found the newspapers loaded with fever, hysteria, confusion, bewilderment, energy, accounts of small news on the inside pages, and much copy on the Henry Armstrong-Baby Arizmendi fight. Small men, less light in colour than the average of this country, but powerful, clever, and artful in their particular field.

Then Adolf (Hitler) made his reunion in Vienna, marched the men up the field and down again, Austria, of the Blue Danube, was anschluss, or back in the fold, and a man whose hyphenated name I shall not try to spell, roared with love in his voice his welcome to what he

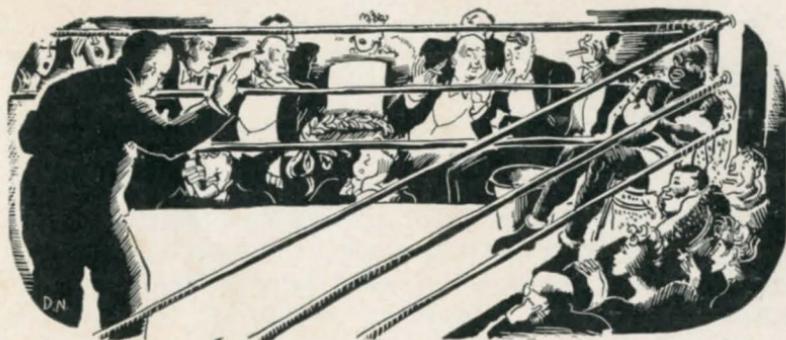
called his Führer, one might say his beloved Führer.

We saw the fight between Armstrong and Arizmendi: I mean by we, myself and eleven scenario writers.

At the fight it was announced that a ringside patron for the past forty-two or three years had finally passed away. A purple wreath or something else sad in image was in his seat, and next to the seat was Al Jolson.

The little chubby fight announcer who looks like a real estate salesman asked for silence, during which to count ten for the deceased, which he did. The silence was not exactly whole-hearted or complete: it contained boos, hisses, witty remarks, whistling, and roars of laughter, as well as severe reproofs from anonymous people with a sense of the fitting, or perhaps a classically Western regard for the solemnity of death. The deceased was duly counted out and the fighters of the next bout introduced.

The Austrian affair, however, grew in leaps and bounds during the fights, and after the main event, in which the Mexican Arizmendi refused to be annihilated by the Negro, and in fact fought a handsome fight, the morning papers were full of new developments, so



that by the time we got to Musso and Frank's, on Hollywood Boulevard, a writer was found at the bar, drunk, with a paper open in front of him, and tears streaming out of his eyes.

There was a map of Spain in the paper which plainly showed how the Rebels were driving the Loyalists to the sea.

"It's hopeless," the young writer said, and ordered another Scotch and soda.

"What is?" another writer asked.

"Everything," the first writer replied.

In between times, while waiting for new editions of papers, I read a movie story and, finding it lousy, said so. This was an ignorant thing to do, but in a way a pleasing one. As a matter of fact, the story wasn't lousy at all. It was, I believe, a characteristic kind of story. It perhaps only seemed lousy. I

probably made a mistake, and if I were to be burned at the stake for my opinion I believe I wouldn't hesitate a moment before recanting.

There was a good deal of strange, tense, off-colour, and one might say foul-smelling affection between the phonies of Austria and the phonies of Germany over there in Europe, and it all came out in the papers. My Führer, the welcomer said to the invader, and it sounded very much like something slightly opportunistic in some dimension or other.

Then the Polish-Lithuanian border trouble grew in the news, and the scenario writers all worried about that a while, during dinner, and afterwards. They worried also about the executions in Russia.

One original scenario writer spent most of his spare worrying-energy worrying about a woman in the newspapers who'd killed her kids and herself because of poverty.

For the most part, though, the writers worried about the bigger and more worthwhile subjects for worrying.

I spent only a week in the city where the world's imagination is manufactured, but during the whole week everybody I ran into was worrying, on the whole, about headlines. You'd never imagine they were all trying to create a better world, through hook or crook, willy-nilly, or any other way. You got the idea that they were all lost in some grotesque, one might say, desolation in which they were cut off from the world.

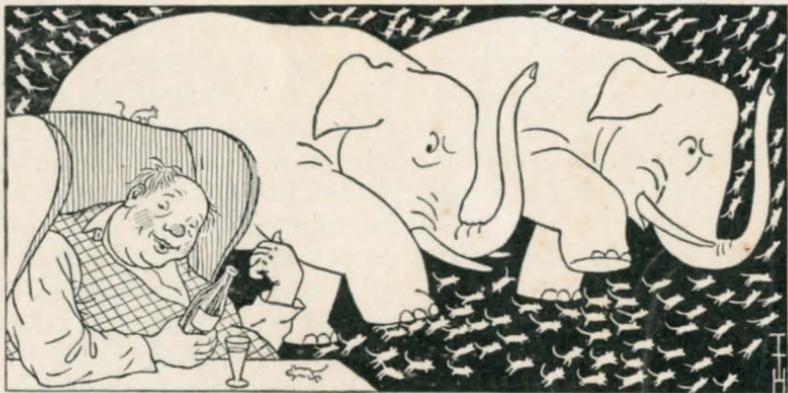
Nobody worried about having a

chance to make a movie that would go out to what is known as the four corners of the world and make the little people realize what monkeys they are being made of, if one may be forgiven a sentence like that.

A fellow passenger on the train back to Frisco was a man named, if memory serves, Louis C. Morgan, a scenario writer, I believe. Less than two hours after getting off the train he spoke to a banquet room full of lions, or something.

I think he told them America is OK. The people all got the lunch out of it, I believe.

I took a cab home and didn't shave because I wasn't invited to dinner.



Drawing by T. T. Heine

"Since I've been finishing my first bottle of brandy before breakfast, the white mice don't trouble me any more. The white elephants trample them to death."