LITERARY PAGE

We Are So Sorry, Dr. Kuo

By MARJORIE MAJOR

YOU are speeding somewhere in a train, perhaps, tonight —we don't know where. And your black keen eyes are just as black, and just as keen. Ond as you watch the telegraph poles of America whizzing past, there is something we would like to say to you. . . .

We are so sorry, Dr. Kuo, that we can't say these things out loud—but perhaps you can hear our thoughts, or perhaps you already know them.

You spoke to us several months ago, Dr. Kuo, on "China and the World Conflict." You divided your speech into what you called "Psychological" errors, and we smiled just a little over your pronunciation of "psychological."

First, you told us about China and Japan, the history behind Pearl Harbor. You told us of the 1,000,000 demoralized Japanese troops in China. Oh, you told us many interesting things . . . and we settled back in our chairs, for this wasn't going to be one of "those speeches," one of these uncomfortable speeches, we mean.

Then you told us that China was asking the United States for 1,000 light aircraft and 50 air transports. You explained that these would be important in turning the Japanese tide in China.

You didn't say much more about this, Dr. Kuo, but behind your words we saw Shanghai, the seventh largest city in the world, burned to the ground except for the street lights which burn every night like long yellow fingers reaching into nothingness.

We saw the long trek to the west of your refugees, we saw a coolie carrying the wreck of a railroad track toward that same west, to build something out of nothing. We took a brief glimpse at your sparse artillery and machine parts, and then looked at Japanese planes and guns. We say your young boys coming down out of their mountain villages to fight across burned rice fields and muddy rivers with swords, not guns—with swords. Then we suddenly realized that the amount you asked for was exactly five per cent of what we send to Great Britain every month.

And, Dr. Kuo, your request was as unanswerable as the deaths of your four million soldiers in the past five years.

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THEN you began to tell us of what you called the "Kipling policy," this policy, you defined as the conception held by Great Britain, France, Russia, Germany, the United States, that Asiatic countries are large, ripe melons, to be plucked and sucked dry, and the husks thrown back to their people.

As you defined this policy, we thought of many things, Dr. Kuo. We say China not for the Chinese. We saw your seaports in foreign hands, we say your women and children working as virtual slaves under a foreign contract factory system. We saw the opium war with Great Britain, the Boxer rebellion, we saw the marines bombing Hong Kong—and we saw the wealthy foreigner eating his $600 dinner at a restaurant called "Le Bonne," in Shanghai . . . where 10,000 starved every winter.

And about then, we began to move a little in our chairs, we realized that our left shoe hurt, and that warm lunches were waiting for us. Most of us began to think of the cigarettes and the warm food, and the gay talk. . . .

And as we were thinking these things, what was it that you said, Dr. Kuo? Did you say "If these policies are continued after the war, China will be forced to the death to remove them?"

The few of us who heard you, thought of many, many things. We saw a new, young China—growing up in a world far removed from that of their ancestors, we saw your New Life movement, your hospitals, your young nurses.

We saw your new passions, your new hates, and we remembered your new-old rationality. We looked down the long path of your history, and we realized that your Great Wall is the only thing ever built by man that could be seen from the planet Mars.

And about that time, Dr. Kuo, we wished we could have stopped you. Because, you see, we aren't interested in you after the war. When the war is over, we want back our big, shining cars, and our Sunday trips into the country to see the signboards, and our big, vulgar homes, and our complacency.

And, Dr. Kuo, we don't understand you. We don't understand you any more than we understand the drift of an iris petal, or the tinkle of a wind harps, or the sharp bayonet of hunger, or the death-riders of disease and starvation. . . .

And we are afraid of you . . . We are afraid of the day when we shall have to stand by some dead Chinese soldier and SEE that his blood is as thick, and as warm, and as red as ours . . . and that the earth receives it more kindly, because he knew her better.

Potter

I shape
with ever-loving heart
the clay
of many-colored words,
and turn
my earthen idioms
with care,
till they acquire the sheen
from thought
that you, the customer,
desire,
and that will flatter most
the room
within your quiet mind.

What more
might you request of me
beyond
the beauty of design?

—E. Claudine Biggs.

Literary Page Staff:
Editor: Carol Greening
Contributors:
Marjorie Major
E. Claudine Biggs

A New York Fairy Tale

TILDA by Mark Van Doren, Henry Holt and Company. $2.50.

The year happened to be 1942 . . . war a disturbing background. The setting? New York, with its fire escapes, apartments, ferryboats, baseball games, corporations . . . grand hotels. The scene begins . . . the curtain is raised on the figure of a man, leaning motionless over the rail of a hotel fire escape. Across the court, Tilda, twenty-one, fair, placid and practical, is watching him, through binoculars, rather like a modern Lady of Shalott. It's foolish, it's a waste of time, she tells herself. Why should she be so glad to spend a free half-day in watching that mysterious figure?

Here is romance, timeless and lovely as ever. The heroine is an air-raid warden, the hero an army captain. For her he was clad in armor as shining as that which adorned the fairy prince. To him she was the image of his wife, whom he mourned. And so they met . . . He calls her "Harriet," his dead wife's name, and she is too kind to disillusion him. How she cures him of his grief and rediscovers herself is a refreshing and touching love story which should satisfy the reader who is not looking for profound inferences and deep currents of meaning.

Perhaps Mark Van Doren saw such a man one day, with tragedy in his face, looking into space. Or such a girl, delving deep into a box of popcorn to find the trinket at the bottom, laughing into her lover's face. At any rate, he has created two characters, flung logic out the window, and made up a pretty romance about them.

He does not suggest how it is possible for a man to recover from a deep personal tragedy within the short space of a week and to fall in love with a girl sufficiently to forget his sorrow within that time. The realities of life do not enter into this novel—its function is to amuse and soothe—that it performs admirably.

For those who wish entertainment and anaesthesia from the headlines, here is the solution. The background does have a suggestion of war, but that is counterbalanced by the simple routine of Tilda's everyday life, which is depicted skillfully. Even the air raid warden duties hardly seem consequential.

"Tilda" leaves one with a good taste in one's mouth.—C.G.