

[picture postcard: Angel Moroni Monument,
Hill Cumorah, near Palmyra, New York]³⁴

[POSTMARKED HUDSON, NY, 27 JULY 1938]

Here were many mighty works & a great outpouring of the spirit so that I prophesied and entered into the Kingdom Celestial.

B

Walpole, New Hampshire.

[2(?) SEPTEMBER 1938]

Dear Kate:

Hell no. One manuscript more wouldn't even be perceptible in the heap I've read through in the last two weeks. I trust the comment is full enough. I'd expand it to three-quarters of an hour at Bread Loaf but I wouldn't say any more. The gospel according to DeVoto (Uncle Belly as the psychopathology of everyday life made the speaker of the evening call me on Tuesday night) is just this: a story is about one thing, a story is developed, a story is dramatized.

It was a good conference, the best yet by a Mormon block. Primarily because there were some writers there. Theodore Strauss, Harriet Hassell, Josephine Niggly, a gent named Ford, another one named Turtellot, all Bread Loaf Fellows, were pretty good, and Strauss is going to be better than that.³⁵ (He did "A Night at Hogwallow," which I didn't give a prize in the L-B novelette contest.)³⁶ But the nicest Fellow, and one who is going to go farther than the rest of them except Strauss, is Elizabeth Davis, a very pretty child from Michigan with one of those voices, like Josephine's in MT, whose teleology is to knock me for a row of nostalgic heartbreaks.³⁷ Someone wrote me about a long story of hers in *Good Housekeeping*, called "Fourteenth Summer," and it turned out to be damned good. I think I've done for her exactly what I did for Frances Prentice and Kitty Bowen four years back: pulled her out of words and vegetables and meteorology into action. (Frances, appearing with Charlie for a week-end, remarked that she was the complete Bread Loaf product: she went there and hasn't written a word since.) The Davis girl had never seen an author before and her introduction to the life literary ought to last for a while. Since JJ wasn't to appear for several days, I fastened on to her and took her, that first evening, to the Long Trail with Robert Frost. My headlights showed a porcupine waddling off through the shrubbery and Robert said, "I hate those bastards!" and got out and chased it, yelling for a club. The beast escaped for he was too intent on murder, I too weak with laughter, and Davis too bewildered to find a club. But that study in black and white of America's greatest poet running hellbent behind his shadow over the boulders and among the rock-maples of the main ridge of the Green Mountains, and yelling oaths at the porcupine and me should be in

somebody's book. If I do an Easy Chair called "The Fretful Poet and the Porcupine" it will be because I know a literary memoir when I see one in the flesh.

The Green Mountains fairly crawled with wild life. Middlebury Gap is lousy with deer this year and the highway department ought to put up signs. Josephine and I saw eleven in one evening and, unless deer move faster than a Series 40 Buick, they were different deer. On the night of the wildest storm I ever saw in these parts Bob Bailey, driving down the gap to see how much road was left (also with Davis), saw a white rabbit in his headlights and chased it here and there through the remnants of a rainstorm, a cloudburst I mean, and a diminishing gale, till he finally cornered it. That was anyway a mile, also cross-country. Bob's intention seems to have been to restore it to its young after this cataclysm of nature, but life was just fantasy for the ensuing twenty-four hours. The storm had blacked out the entire gap and we all crawled to bed by flashlight and through puddles three feet deep, and so Bob had to wake me at three-thirty and take me out to pick grass for the rabbit. And all the next day whenever anyone got into an automobile, the rabbit was there first, and whenever anyone went anywhere there was the rabbit loping ahead of him or else Bailey loping after the rabbit. In the face of it, I don't wonder that Herschel Brickell delivered an entirely uncalled-for denunciation of Robert Nathan.³⁸

Quite apart from its professional features, which had me delivering seven lectures, conducting eight round tables, and reading enough mss to produce an *American Caravan*, the conference was exhausting to the emotions.³⁹ I feel as though God had milled and bolted me, and that's Frost's fault. . . . Come a week or so, I think I'd better write you the story, for I'll have to get it phrased in order to understand it, and I don't know any other place to phrase it.⁴⁰ The point is simple enough. Frost's demon is loosed, and either a genius is breaking up or it isn't. I don't know. I still see reason to hope it isn't, but these are terrible days for people who reverence him. He breaks down into about equal parts willful child, demanding child, jealous woman, and mere devil. Elinor's death has not only accelerated a process that had already scared hell out of me but has also removed the only effective check to it. Well, it can come out two ways. It can find some new equilibrium and fusion that will produce a great work, probably in prose if I read the signs right, or it can just produce a grotesque downfall of a great man, the greatest person of our time, a mere dissolution, a distillation of envy and jealousy and quivering ego that will deliver him forever into the hands of his enemies and make his friends a defensive circle ringed round him in a hopeless effort to keep him covered with fig leaves and their cloaks.

And it's going to be hard in Cambridge, whither he's going to move, having been elected one of the Overseers. Hardest on Kay Morrison, who alone can manage him a little, and on me, who in the last couple of years have become his closest confidant and

have undertaken to write the only book about his poetry that will ever be written by a man who knows him, understands the poetry, and has exhaustively studied the period of which he is a part. As early as last winter it was apparent that he couldn't take me on the only terms anyone will ever get a chance to take me on, or at least couldn't refrain from trying to make his terms. It's damned funny. I'm on record, over my signature, with the declaration, in complete sobriety, against the whole background of the age and my announced standards, that Frost is not only the one great poet of his period but also the finest poet in the whole sweep of American literature. He knows that my book will be merely a documentation and development of that judgment. And that isn't enough. He must try to woo me, cajole me, petition me, threaten me into absolute subjection. I must have no other poets beside him, living or dead, but especially living. I must flame with all his million grievances against the others. I must deliver over to his whim and control, his absolute control and his slightest momentary whim, my entire faculty of judgment. He knows I won't, and yet he is driven, practically every minute I spend with him, to make me, either by thunder or by pathetics, or by personal malice or by wild threats. So, of this recent chaos, which began for me at least when he came through New York with Elinor's ashes, the indiscriminate vengefulness and jealousy and compulsive bitterness, I get a specially poisoned share. I can take it. But by God what it's going to do to my basic ideas is something to worry about. For many years before I knew him and throughout all my relations with him till now he has been important to me primarily because his existence proved that there was such a thing as a sane genius.

Well, I'm going to remember a remark of Charlie Curtis's for a long time. Charlie and Frances got to Bread Loaf in time for the blowoff, last Saturday. Archie MacLeish came to talk and read his poetry. Robert had been specifically warned by Kay not to make a scene and I had prepared Archie for one. (Archie, the whitest man in the literary business, doesn't yet know exactly what happened and left muttering dazedly, "Robert has lost his pride—there can be no rivals of Robert Frost.") But Robert interpreted some allusion of Archie's to Spender as a slur at him.⁴¹ So when some twenty of us, staff and fellows and Frances and Charlie, were gathered in the staff cottage afterward, in one of those evening bull sessions that alone take me back to Bread Loaf, Robert saw fit to make an attack of unearthly brilliance and pathetic envy and jealousy on Archie. It was ghastly, it was indecent, and Ted Morrison and Herschel Brickell (who worships Robert) and I tried repeatedly to interrupt it or head it off or put a stop to it, and none of us got anywhere. The less initiated were gaping, terribly uncomfortable but fascinated. Some of the more initiated were shuddering, some were on the verge of tears. I got mad at Robert for the only time in my experience and voiced a direct rebuke that wasn't intended to call him to his senses but only to put a stop to

an intolerable situation—and got nothing, except some subsequent hours of denunciation. Ted was crushed, flouted, all but beside himself. He had to go out twice and walk around in the rain and hold on to himself—and come back to an atmosphere of people at each other's throats, a perfectly tangible atmosphere of the inconceivable and intolerable. That room was just so many knives. And just as Ted came in from his second walk, Charlie Curtis came up to him, Charlie a little tight, rosy, radiating good nature and affection for the place where his own love affair had taken its final pattern, the place which he was now visiting for the first time. I saw him go up to Ted, and I found time to think, this is the essential and immortal Charlie, this is the Charlie we all know, and this is going to be good. So I edged up too, in time to hear him say, from the bottom of his full heart, "Ted, what I like about Bread Loaf is, people have such a g-o-o-d time here."

Yours,
Benny

Walpole, New Hampshire.

[11 SEPTEMBER 1938]

Dear Kate:

I'm in the backwash of a beautiful, a really soul-stirring, migraine. I've consulted the local faculty and find no extrinsic reason for it, so it must be the unresolved guilt carrying over from having got mad at Frost. God knows he's been my father image these last three years, and God knows I was plenty mad at him at Bread Loaf. . . . I spent Thursday and Friday night with him at St. Johnsbury and came away, if to migraine (which had opened up before I went), nevertheless considerably relieved about him. Thursday night, talking till I fell asleep and Avis had to carry the burden, he was as superb as I've ever seen him and no difficult moments. Maybe that *crise*⁴² at Bread Loaf was his low tide.

He summoned me to Concord Corner, a few miles from St. Johnsbury, to look over a place he wants me to buy.⁴³ He's got interested in the Corner the last couple of years and is making over two houses there and threatens to buy some more. It's a spectacular place he showed me, a house on a hill at whose foot there's a big pond shaped, as Bunny promptly said, like South America, and beyond the pond a vista stretching away clear to the Franconia range, all seven of which show magnificently reflected in the pond. A hundred and twenty-odd acres, most of it in pasture and wood of course. Two springs, one above the house. An old orchard for decoration and firewood. The house would need about two thousand dollars put into it. The whole for sale at five thousand, which means four thousand or even thirty-seven-fifty. I don't want to put more than three thousand into a place that calls for two thousand more right off, but I could tackle this without too much strain. But I don't think I will.

For one thing, it's too damn far. If we're saying no to Peacham, which is the loveliest spot on the map of Vermont, because it's anyway a five hours' drive from Boston, what's the point of going to a place that's nearly six hours? And though it's a really spectacular view, it isn't as spectacular as the one from Peacham Hill nor as charming as the one at South Lincoln which I would have bought earlier this summer only I found it two days after it had been sold. (Didn't tell you about that; it was one of the Bread Loaf incidents, and South Lincoln is the Danvis of Rowland Robinson's stories, one of the places I somehow couldn't ever get to when I started for them, like Sharon, and so never saw till this year.⁴⁴ Mt. Abraham was fairly in your lap, at this house, and the whole valley of Lincoln and Bristol stretched out in front of you. A grand place.) But the payoff is really Concord Corner itself. I'd never been there, though Concord itself, two miles away, is perfectly familiar to me. It's a genuine specimen of the Vermont abandoned town. Frost paid seven hundred dollars for his two houses, and he can pick up the five or six others that make the village at the same rate. The farms are all like the one he showed me, unfarmable; lived on, that is, by French Canadians. And the villagers are just vestigial. Frost has a genuine liking for everyone, but I can't like relics. He also talks about its being unspoiled, meaning there aren't any college professors there. He hopes to get some of his friends there and establish what I called, to his face, a phalanstery.⁴⁵ But my God, I'd rather have college professors than Vermont poor whites. I don't want to live in Greensboro, where there are fourteen hundred pedagogues in the summer, but Peacham with twenty-odd would be about right.

After all I like my Vermonters unlicked. The whole point about Vermont is solvent independence. (I'm going to interview the Governor next week, I think, and maybe write about him from that text.) When they're neither solvent nor independent, hell, you might as well move into the TVA. Practically alone among the literary advertisers of the state, I recognize the existence of a poor white population, but that's no reason for moving in on a pre-emption.

Frost is closing the South Shaftesbury house and, I think, will sell it. He appears to be going to move Carroll [*sic*] off the stone house to sell that too.⁴⁶ He'll never go back to Shaftesbury—can't stand the idea. He's getting reckless with his money, too, which is both un-Frost and un-Yankee. He wanted to give me one of his Concord Corner houses, at one point. He'll try to give it to the Morrisons. He'll end by giving it to someone.

This was the summer I was going to buy a Vermont house. Why do you never do what you plan to do? We haven't even looked, and the only convenient alibi is the weather. We swept through Thetford Hill, Bradford, and Newbury the other day, and I've always thought it would come to that part of the state in the end. Logic says three hours from Boston, so weekends will be possible without pain, but that practically

limits it to twenty-five miles west, northwest, or north of Brattleboro and, say what you will, that isn't even the third-best part of the state. Avis, with Lake Superior reawakened in her blood, has suddenly plumped for the Champlain valley. Well, Burlington is one of the most civilized towns in America and charming to boot, but the Champlain and Winooski country happens to be the most affluent part of the state and a decent place would cost from ten thousand upward. And it's so damned far. I could live all year in Burlington with great comfort, and in fact have been holding it in reserve in case a literary career breaks over me, but my God you can't weekend there. Me, I'll be satisfied with a house and woodlot and a southern exposure, but Avis wants a vista, and that cuts out the next most logical part, around Bethel, and the next, around Chester.

However, I have broken all precedents by actually reading one of the books I said I was going to this summer, the first volume of Proust.⁴⁷ Pretty damn hard going and, if you ask me, a resumé of nineteenth-century literary styles. I'm assured that, beginning with *The Guermantes Way* I'll begin to get it.⁴⁸ I hope so, but even so it's like getting round to liking a European trip six months after you get home. There has been too much anatomy of the heart for my taste and too much "registration." I hope it all comes home in the end, but I could stand three hundred fewer pages about Odette and Gilberte. Meanwhile the history of the Mexican War I have to read gets into my dreams and I haven't touched the armful of the Albert Bigelow Paine I brought up to give me a flying start on my job. Or any of the other stuff I simply had to read. . . . I have read the Halsey book that Kip Fadiman was so coy about, as if the wench hadn't been his secretary.⁴⁹ Any slap at our English cousins is so much gain, but this wench works pretty hard for some of her wisecracks. My ten years' old proposal was to send Jean Nathan or Thomas Beer to England with a commission to do this book. It's still a good idea.

No use, Kate. There are still too many peristaltic convulsions traveling through my frame to make for clear thought. I'll call this off and continue it when the mind has cleared. Gynergen begins to let me down. I'll have to take to the hypodermic form. The local faculty wants to give me thyroid but I won't take the affront. Giving me an energizer is, still, on a par with giving Hemingway an aphrodisiac.

Yours,

Benny

[handwritten by BDV:] Mailed about 3 PM Sunday. What day does it arrive?

[handwritten by KS:] Arrive Wed noon

32 Coolidge Hill Road
Cambridge, Massachusetts

SUNDAY [25 SEPTEMBER 1938]

Dear Kate:

Well.

It was quite a storm.⁵⁰ I didn't realize that it was till it was practically over, when, looking out of the kitchen window, I saw the hill road below us, which had been shut out with trees all summer long. . . . Everybody's got to tell his story (I listened to Ted Morrison's last night—they were on the Mountain and the road to Middlebury one way and Hancock the other just ceased to exist and they came out by tractor—and Kenneth Murdock has disappeared into the blue) so you've got to learn to take it.

I'd been alone with Bunny for eight days of rain and recurrent headaches while Avis moved the household up here. Tuesday looked bad and I telephoned her to come up to Walpole early instead of late as she'd planned. She did so and, Wednesday being dry for a change and looking better, we packed the car to the guards and started off with nothing on our minds except the probable collapse of the Buick. It has been collapsing at short intervals ever since we got back from Michigan and my moderate prayer now is that it may hold together till the 1939 models are out and I can see what they look like. We got down to the village and started to say goodbye to people but learned that the Keene road was out, the Brattleboro road was out, and only the shun pike over the hills open and that problematical. Considering all the rain, and the visible Connecticut, that made sense, so we went back to the house and unpacked the car and took it for granted that the roads would be open the next day. Then it began to rain some more.

Toward noon it cleared and I remembered that I was once a newspaperman and set out to take some pictures. They won't be very good for the clouds came back but I did a thorough job on the Connecticut at Bellows Falls, which was whooping through the gorge; the Green Mountain Power Co.'s dam, which was being cleared and stripped as rapidly as a big crew could do the job; and Cold River, which was inconceivably high and came over the lower road just after I did.⁵¹ Back at Walpole, there were rumors that Greenfield was under water, that Shelburne Falls was in trouble, that the B & M or the B & A had had a wreck at North Adams, and that Keene and Marlborough were now isolated.⁵² I still don't get any of this. The Connecticut was plenty high but as yet nowhere near flood level. At four o'clock, when it began to rain again, my one emotion was regret that I hadn't kept going that morning. I figured that Boston must have been attainable one way or another, and I guess it was but I'm just as glad we stayed in Walpole.

It was about twenty minutes past five when it started to rain like hell and blow like hell. That's all I figured it: just a bad storm. My concern was threefold, to keep Bunny

from getting scared, to keep the doors and shutters on the house, and to keep the two fires in the cellar from causing trouble. There was no need to worry about the first. The kid was excited but not scared and when he got too excited I stretched out on a couch with him and told him Big Chief Tommy stories till he was sleepy. At one point I said, “Well, Bunny, this is something to remember—you’ve seen a sixty-mile gale.” That was just fifty percent off. For the rest, I keep [*sic*] lashing things down and milling round after various odd bits up till eleven o’clock, when it was obvious that nothing more could be or needed to be done. But I knew at twilight that it was more than a gale. All summer long you couldn’t see the village from our house, and now you could. None of the magnificent elms on our place were blown over but a couple of them were pretty well stripped.

After about a half-hour of it a tremendous run-off came down the hill above us and curved round the house, flowing down over the terrace. It was about forty feet wide and God knows how deep, missed the house by about thirty feet, and kept flowing for nearly an hour. The lawn is terraced and there’s about a six-foot drop, over which this water cascaded with a roar loud enough to drown out the wind. Also for half an hour or so a creek flowed rapidly through the cellar. I was phoning the plumber to ask him what to do about the furnace when the telephone went out. The lights had gone long since, taking the stove and water-system with them. There were plenty of morals for the prospective country squire and that was the sharpest of them. Also: keep plenty of dry clothes on hand. Every time I went out I got soaked. But my God we had it easy. We weren’t even alarmed.

I got the idea the next, Thursday, morning when I went out to take a look. The hill was denuded. Here and there a few trees were standing but in general the effect was as of a giant lawn-mower erratically used. The roads were blocked everywhere and there were no wires up. And you could see the whole stretch of the valley and the Connecticut looked like Long Island Sound. It was over the Central Vermont tracks, over Route 5, over all the lowlands that had ceased to be tobacco farms after the flood of 1936.⁵³ We climbed over trees to get down the hill and found barns blown down, houses unroofed, and the elms and pines simply flattened.... This is one storm that altered a countryside. Hundreds of thousands of elms are down and the New England landscape is changed forever.... The village had suffered plenty of damage but no loss of life. People were killed at Westminster, across the river, and Bellows Falls, five miles up. The cemetery, a dignified one beautifully forested, had hardly a dozen trees left standing and some of them had opened graves when they were uprooted. Most of the forestry projects, all of them that ran to pine, were absolutely levelled. The roads were blocked everywhere. No lights, no telephone at first, nothing coming through, and of course no radios except those that ran by battery.

I poked around all Thursday, taking pictures and listening to things. The town had the hill road cleared by noon and a half dozen others by night. We could drive a mile either way on #12 and could get across the bridge to Vermont, to fifty feet of Vermont, I mean. Then the Connecticut swept in with a tremendous current and all the lowlands to Westminster were under water. It was most interesting to follow, by radio, the extempore organization forming to deal with the disaster, and to hear the rumors that were sent out. We learned that the Vineyard had been wiped out, that the Agassiz Museum had been destroyed, that Boston was under martial law. The slow growth of the realization that a really tremendous disaster had occurred was quite an experience. We moved down to the Walpole Inn and hung round the telephone office trying to get either phone calls or telegrams through.⁵⁴ No chance.

Friday the best advice over the radio was that only one road to Boston was open, by way of Nashua, and that Nashua couldn't be reached by Keene, Franklin, or any other way from Walpole except possibly from Portland—and Portland couldn't be reached. But one car had got through from Fitchburg the night before and several came up from Keene while I was getting information. Avis thought we ought to wait another day but I wanted to get home and so we shoved off. It was easy. No difficulty at all and only about a dozen places where the going was hard, usually because of trees down for a couple of hundred yards at a stretch but occasionally from washouts. Normally I'd drive from Walpole to Cambridge in just under two and a half hours. It took us four and a quarter, including a brief stop in Nashua for lunch. The irritating thing was that the day looked threatening and, since even a brief rainstorm would close things indefinitely, I pushed on without stopping for any of a hundred photographs I wanted to take.

It's quite a sight, New England after the big storm. Keene got it really terribly. The Ashuelot always overflows after a heavy dew and this time it had a cloudburst. Also there are some miles without hills to break the wind. One of the most beautiful forests in New England was the memorial park north of town, forty or fifty acres of magnificent white pines some fifty years old. Not one of them is standing now. It looks precisely like the stretches of Florida forests that were flattened in November, 1935. But that's true of all the pine groves. Pines can't take it, apparently: too shallow rooted. The millionaires' estates round Dublin are the same way. Peterborough is always ugly at high water and this time it had a fire too: the whole west side of the business section north of the bridge is flat. There was apparently a break in the storm some twenty miles round Wilton; very few trees down and no barns. From there to Nashua we saw little damage but at Nashua we picked up the Merrimack, high over the B & M tracks, and wreckage everywhere. This part of Massachusetts isn't damaged much. Lots of magnificent elms down, all the way from Nashua, but little else. Brattle Street is practically treeless, and the Craigie House looks naked. Harvard Yard was pretty well blown down

but the University has managed to get hold of the only crew of tree surgeons in these parts and has already saved a good many trees that otherwise would have had to go. I haven't been in to Boston yet but, apart from the waterfront, nothing much has been disturbed.

I want to get down to the shore, especially along Buzzards Bay but I'm being a citizen and obeying the authorities.⁵⁵ That, of course, is where the worst of it is. So far as I've been able to check up in thirty-six hours, nobody I know except Elmer Davis, who is reported by the *Herald-Tribune* to be missing, got into trouble. Today's papers say nothing about Elmer and I'm still hoping, but Mason's Island is just a strip of sand rising out of the water and his house is only one story high.⁵⁶ Frances Curtis was in Providence and Phoebe was in New Haven on their way to Stonington and are OK. Most of the Cambridge gang had returned in preparation for registration. Nobody has been able to learn how the summer places took it, except those who were on them. Kenneth and Perry Miller left for Hill on Thursday and haven't been heard from. The best guess is that all the M houses at Hill are flat, being built on a thin shelf above an underground river. Also that Hill can't be reached at all from either Danbury or Franklin. Ted reports that Rochester, Vt., which was practically wiped out in 1927 and again in 1936, has been practically wiped out for the third time and that our pals in the furniture factory, which survived the two earlier floods, have now given up and closed the village industry. There must be a lot of that in the interior Vermont valleys. I haven't seen anything about Bethel but all that country must have been chewed to pieces. The dams saved Barre again, though—twice in two years—and Montpelier is OK. The gaps and notches have probably been washed completely free of roads. Middlebury Gap, which contains Bread Loaf and Ripton, has been. God save us the swell curve in Smugglers' Notch.⁵⁷

Well, this is just me checking in. I'll write you a letter before the week is out—provided no refugees or relief work get dumped on me. I'm up to my ears in arranging a library on shelves I didn't build myself and God has no more exasperating job. So it's back to noisy plumbing, unpainted houses, and the untraceable smell of leaking gas—to the place where my friends are—to, I'm almost ready to admit, Mountain Time. It would be a bird of ill omen to welcome me, Ernie Simmons, whom I'll probably choke, slowly, some day.⁵⁸ The Deknatels materialize out of thin air on the doorstep, it seems that the Hillyers have moved back to Cambridge slums to economize and live directly across the street, there's a Yale historian next door, and this morning Bunny dropped an r. Cambridge is the damndest place.

Yours,
Benny

[unsigned and possibly not sent; cf. next letter]

Bowne

[AB: EARLY OCTOBER 1938]

Dear Benny,

Well, this is one war we would surely have gotten into. Never, not even in 1917, have I seen American public opinion so thoroughly aroused. The entire hospital—from Dr. Williams to the orderly—is brushing up its vocabulary for Chamberlain's benefit. Every person I've spoken to or heard from—and this includes liberals of all shades, Republicans, Democrats (pro- & anti-New Deal), Socialists, Communist Party members & Communist sympathizers—seems to feel that the Berchtesgaden-Godesberg-Munich sell-out was one of the stupidest, as well as one of the most perfidious, episodes in the long & perfidious history of the British Empire.⁵⁹

Of course there is the possibility that German expansion is inevitable, that if it doesn't happen now it will happen twenty years from now, that it might have been better if America had stayed out in 1917 & let Germany win then instead of now. I find this very difficult to swallow, not only because Čechoslovakia is such a splendid little state, not only because Naziism is so emetic, but because the German character as such is so emetic. In fact, as far as I'm concerned, Nazism is the essence of the German character. I realize that that is an emotional reason, but there it is.

Bowne

[BEFORE 7 OCTOBER 1938]

Dear Benny,

Christ, how I hate linen writing-paper!

Well, we got off pretty easily although we didn't think so at the time. My first inkling came Wednesday afternoon when a broadcast of Maurice Hindus' from Prague was called off because the Columbia antenna on Long Island had been blown down.⁶⁰ ... About five o'clock I was sitting up in bed eating supper, a bridge-lamp shining on my tray-table, radio softly playing dance-music, a G.E. electric heater whirling away in the corner of the room—zip, everything stopped... silence, semi-darkness, cold. Nothing but the grey light seeping through the French windows & the wind screaming outside. I saw a few branches sailing through the air, but I didn't hear until the next day that a half-dozen trees on the place had been uprooted. Several people were drowned in Po'keepsie & several others killed by falling trees. The roof was blown off the Henrys' house in Stamfordville, & the Warrens, whose house stands on a bluff overlooking Wappingers Creek, report that the creek was within two feet of the bluff-top.

The cessation of power, of course, completely paralyzed the hospital. No light. No water, no heat, no nurses' call-bells, no elevator, no dishwashing machine, no anything. Some of us telephoned down town for White Rock & flashlights, but roads were out & taxis couldn't get through.⁶¹ About seven PM Bullard came around with candles. About nine o'clock the power came on. Finis.

The Germans are a race of subthyroid adrenocentrics.

The Germans are a race of anal-erotics.

The Germans are a race of bastards.

No matter where you start, that's where you end.

Never—not even in 1917—have I seen American opinion so unanimous & so aroused. The entire hospital, from superintendent to orderlies, is still brushing up its vocabulary on Hitler & Chamberlain. Everyone I've talked to or heard from is in a pother of righteous indignation. If France & Britain had fought I wouldn't have given us six months to keep out.

Among the bitterest of Chamberlain's critics has been Leonidoff. Much as he hates the Bolsheviks he hates the British still more: on the principle, I suppose, that it's easier to forgive an enemy than a double-crossing friend. Now he is hoping that Germany & Russia will get together & skin the lion.

In retrospect, I don't see how we could have thought the dirty business would turn out other than as it did. Your friend Fred Scherman blue-printed it & so, somewhat less specifically, did Geoffrey Garratt & Norman Angell in their books.⁶² Everyone has known for a long time that Chamberlain & the Cliveden set are pro-Fascist. N. C. has certainly made no bones about wanting to play with Hitler & Mussolini, & as far back as April I remember *Time* remarking that the British press was busily building up a picture of Czechoslovakia as "a remote little country with a funny name" which could not possibly be any concern of Britain's. And do you remember NC's speech of Tuesday the 27th: "It is incredible, it is horrible, etc. that we in England should be getting ready to go to war on behalf of people whom we don't even know"—or however it went?

Certainly it seems to me that an anonymous writer in the *Trib* is closer to the truth than either Dorothy Thompson (who, in case you don't read the *Trib*, considers the Sept. 21 Runciman Report mere propaganda, tailored to justify the Berchtesgaden agreement) or Walter Lippmann (who takes the view that the Runciman report was the cause rather than the result of the Sudetenland cession).⁶³ This writer says that he had it from an authoritative source in Whitehall, as far back as the beginning of May, that England intended to see that Hitler got the Sudetenland on a platter.⁶⁴ He says that in England the Runciman Commission was never considered anything more than window-dressing, that Lord R. was sent to Prague simply to stall for time until

Chamberlain & Hitler could devise a way to transfer the territory without getting Russia & France on their necks. I dare say that all the *opéra bouffe*⁶⁵ of the past month was also necessary to prepare British public opinion, as opposed to Whitehall, for the shock.

... Your letter arrived Wednesday noon, & damned welcome!

Yours,

Kate

NOTES

1. Elzire (Mrs. Oliva) Dionne, mother of the Dionne quintuplets (born 28 May 1934 in Quebec, to worldwide amazement and acclaim).
2. Harry Hansen.
3. James J. Braddock, "The Cinderella Man" (1906–1974), heavyweight champion 1935–1937, defeated Tommy Farr (1914–1986) in a decision after ten rounds, 21 January 1938.
4. *Assignment in Utopia*, autobiography of journalist Eugene Lyons (1898–1985). His "Reporting Russia: Twenty Years of Books on the Soviet Regime" was published as the leader in *SRL* 17/9 (25 December 1937); rebutted in *Letters, SRL* 17/13 (22 January 1938).
5. Appointed by President Conant from among the senior Harvard faculty, in the wake of the Walsh-Sweezy affair, to study and make recommendations on faculty hiring and tenure policy. The members included Professors Murdock, Schlesinger, Frankfurter, and Perry, all supportive of BDV; their presence on the committee made it awkward for them to plead his case for rehiring.
6. Apparently the economist Henderson (1895–1986).
7. Rebecca West had a son, Anthony West (British author, 1914–1987), out of wedlock, by Wells.
8. In "Reviewers on Parade," *New Republic* 93/1209 (2 February 1938), about reviews of Dos Passos's *The Big Money*, 1936; BDV's review, "John Dos Passos: Anatomist of Our Time," appeared in *SRL* 14/15 (8 August 1936).
9. Gregory (1898–1982), poet, leftist writer, reviewer for the *New York Herald Tribune*; *Chorus For Survival*, 1935; *History of American Poetry, 1900–1940*, coauthor with his wife, the poet Marya Zaturenska, 1946.
10. "The Journey Down," 1938, reviewed in "Fiction Drowned in Talk," *SRL* 17/18 (26 February 1938).
11. "Faulkner's South," BDV's review of *The Unvanquished*, *SRL* 17/17 (19 February).
12. *Sartoris*, published 1929; published again in 1973, in an unabridged version, as *Flags in the Dust*.
13. Starrett, *Penny Wise and Book Foolish*, 1929; *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, 1933; *Persons from Porlock*, 1938. "Stringtown on the Pike," by John Uri Lloyd (1849–1936), pharmacist and novelist, 1900. He also wrote *Etidorhpa, or the End of the Earth*, 1895; *Felix Moses, the Beloved Jew of Stringtown on the Pike*, 1930; "Fragments from an Autobiography," *Eclectic Medical Journal*, July 1927.
14. *Tales of the Telegraph: The Story of a Telegrapher's Life and Adventures in Railroad, Commercial, and Military Work*, by Jasper Ewing Brady, 1899.
15. *Bernard DeVoto: A Preliminary Appraisal*, by Garrett Mattingly, 1938, a short book about to be published by Little, Brown.
16. Anthony Eden (1897–1977) of Britain, appointed foreign secretary in 1935, after prolonged disagreement with Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain (1869–1940) over the government's policies of yielding to Hitler's and Mussolini's territorial demands in Europe, resigned on Sunday,

- 20 February 1938. A lengthy debate in the House of Commons on Eden's resignation began on 21 February. Churchill's *The Gathering Storm* (Vol. 1 of *The Second World War*) does not mention a no-confidence motion, but a Labour motion of censure was defeated, 330-168, after furious debate. Three weeks later, on 12 March 1938, Nazi troops marched unopposed into Vienna, and Hitler proclaimed the annexation (*Anschluss*) of Austria into the German Reich.
17. Henry Wickham Steed (1871–1956), editor of the London *Times*, 1919–1922; *The Hapsburg Monarchy*, 1919.
 18. Novel by Elmer Rice, 1937.
 19. By Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), Scottish writer, 1837.
 20. Princess Marie Bonaparte of Greece (1882?–1962, granddaughter of Napoleon's nephew), psychoanalyst, a disciple of Freud. William C. Bullitt, ambassador to France (and coauthor, with Freud, of a psychobiography of Woodrow Wilson that was not published until 1966), also joined the mission to rescue the great psychoanalyst, whose theories were anathematized by the Nazis on scientific as well as racial grounds. Jones tells the story in his *Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, volume 3, chapter 6.
 21. At Berggasse 19 in the Währing district of Vienna, near the Votivkirche; it is now a museum, complete with Freud's couch and collection of ancient statuary.
 22. By Shaw, 1920.
 23. Vanity and a striving after wind, from Ecclesiastes 4:4.
 24. Germany's annexation (*Anschluss*) of Austria was proclaimed on 13 March.
 25. The Polish ultimatum refers to a border dispute with Lithuania.
 26. *A Tailor-Made Man*, comedy by Harry James Smith (1880–1918), 1917. David Snodgrass (1894–1963), Harvard '17, LL.B. '21; dean of the Hastings College of Law, San Francisco, 1940–1963. Ed Stephenson, probably Clarence Stephenson (1895–1977), who spent one year at Harvard Law School. From President Wilson's message to Congress, 2 April 1917, asking Congress to declare war on the Central Powers.
 27. Martin Luther (1483–1546), German Protestant theologian: God help me, I cannot do otherwise.
 28. David Lloyd George (1863–1945), Welsh statesman and orator, liberal prime minister 1916–1922. He and Clemenceau (the "Tiger of France") dominated the negotiations at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, insisting on territorial concessions and a harsh indemnity to be imposed on Germany, as well as an acknowledgment by Germany, in the Versailles Treaty, of responsibility for starting the Great War (the so-called war-guilt clause).
 29. Holmes (1879–1964), Harvard '02, Unitarian clergyman and social activist who helped found the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.
 30. James Knox Polk (1795–1849), eleventh president of the United States, 1845–1849.
 31. Not an editorial but an article: "DeVoto rumored to be returning to College next autumn," 15 March 1938.
 32. (1755–1793), Queen of Louis XVI of France, guillotined during the Revolution.
 33. Sam Brown belts, usually made of wide heavy leather with a rectangular brass buckle; for police use, with holsters and accessories.
 34. Where the Prophet Joseph Smith, in a revelation from the Angel Nephi (later Moroni), was directed to find the golden plates upon which was encoded the sacred text of the *Book of Mormon*, 1820.
 35. Strauss (b.1912), screenwriter; *Isn't It Romantic?*, 1948; *Four Days in November*, 1964; *The Indomitable Teddy Roosevelt*, 1986; producer, *The Bridge at Remagen*, 1969; *Dark Hunger*, novel, 1946 (later retitled *Moonrise*). Hassell (1911–1970); *Rachel's Children*, 1938; in *The Art of Fiction in the*

- Heart of Dixie: An Anthology of Alabama Writers*, 1986. Josefina María Niggli (1910–1983), Mexican-American writer; *Sunday Cost Five Pesos*, play; short stories. Charles (later Charles-Henri) Ford (1908–2002), Mississippi-born avant-garde poet and surrealist photographer and publisher, active in Paris, 1931–1934; founding editor, *Blues* magazine, 1929–1930. Arthur Tourtellot (1913–1977), author, historian, television producer; CBS; *Be Loved No More: The Life and Environment of Fanny Burney*, 1938.
36. 1937.
 37. Possibly Elizabeth Gould Davis (1910?–1974); *The First Sex*, 1971.
 38. Nathan (1894–1985), Harvard '16, author and screenwriter; *Portrait of Jennie*, 1948.
 39. *American Caravan: A Yearbook of American Literature*, edited by Van Wyck Brooks, Alfred Kreymborg, Lewis Mumford, and Paul Rosenfeld, with “seventy-two contributors,” 1927.
 40. Much of the crisis with Frost is recounted by Stegner, who was present, in *The Uneasy Chair*, Part IV, Chapter 6, “An Incident on Bread Loaf Mountain.”
 41. Stephen Spender (1909–1995), British poet.
 42. (French) crisis.
 43. Correctly, Concord Corners.
 44. Sharon, Vermont, birthplace of Joseph Smith.
 45. The Phalanstery was the main meeting house of the short-lived Brook Farm community. See BDV, *The Year of Decision: 1846*.
 46. Robert Frost’s son Carol; BDV probably is thinking of Carroll County in New Hampshire.
 47. *Du côté de chez Swann* (Swann’s Way).
 48. Part III, *Le côté de Guermantes* (1920–1921).
 49. *With Malice toward Some* by Margaret Halsey (1910–1977), 1938; reviewed by Clifton Fadiman in *The New Yorker*, 20 August 1938.
 50. In loss of life and property, the hurricane of 1938 still stands as the most destructive storm ever to strike New England, which recorded 600 of the 700 deaths; 3,500 were injured and 63,000 were made homeless. Nearly 9,000 buildings were completely destroyed, and more than 75,000 were damaged; an estimated 2 billion trees were blown down. In the Connecticut River valley, where the most intense part of the hurricane passed, rainfall varied between 10 and 17 inches. Because the storm occurred during the unusually high tide of the new moon at the time of the autumnal equinox, the peak storm surge came to 17 feet above normal high tide at Providence, which was five feet under water downtown. A wind gust of 186 miles per hour was measured at the Blue Hill Observatory.
 51. With headquarters in Montpelier, the Green Mountain Power Co. is the supplier for much of Vermont’s electric power.
 52. Boston & Maine Railroad, from 1841. Boston and Albany Railroad, chartered 1870, since 1900 part of the New York Central system.
 53. Central Vermont Railway Company, reorganized 1870 from a conglomerate of many smaller companies.
 54. 297 Main Street, Walpole, built 1760s, eight rooms.
 55. Between Rhode Island and the western side of Cape Cod.
 56. Mystic, Connecticut, near the Rhode Island border.
 57. Near Mount Mansfield.
 58. Ernest J. Simmons (1903–1972), professor of Slavic languages; Harvard, Cornell, Columbia.
 59. The climax of Anglo-French appeasement of German territorial demands in the summer of 1938. Hitler insisted that the rights of the Sudeten Germans, in the German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia known as the Sudetenland, had to be satisfied by actual cession of Czech territory into the German Reich. The Czech government expected to defend this territory even

by going to war with Germany, and possessed the strongest army in central Europe next to Germany's. Czechoslovakia was also protected by a military guarantee from both France and the Soviet Union. Britain was pledged to support France, but not Czechoslovakia, and this weakness was exploited by Hitler. In two meetings in September 1938, at Berchtesgaden and at Bad Godesberg, Prime Minister Chamberlain and Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax, together with the French and Soviet ministers, failed to reach an agreement that would satisfy Hitler, and the British began mobilizing for what seemed like a certain outbreak of war with Germany; but at the last minute Chamberlain went to Munich for a third meeting with Hitler, the French ministers, and Mussolini of Italy, with the Soviet Union excluded. Under British pressure, and equally anxious to avoid war, France reneged on its promise to defend the Czechs. The Munich Pact, signed on 30 September, provided for immediate cession of the Sudetenland to Nazi Germany, which in turn pledged to respect the new borders; Czechoslovakia thereby lost her major fortifications and industrial centers. Germany occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939. See J. W. Wheeler-Bennett, *Munich: Prologue to Tragedy*, 1948.

60. Hindus (1891–1969), Russian-born writer on Soviet affairs; New York *Herald Tribune* correspondent during World War II; *Green Worlds*, autobiography, 1938; *Mother Russia*, 1943. The Columbia antenna was probably CBS.
61. White Rock, mineral water and soft drinks, since 1871.
62. KS possibly means Harry Scherman, *The Promises Men Live By: A New Approach to Economics*, 1938. Garratt (1888–1942), author; *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, 1938; *The Shadow of the Swastika*, 1938. Sir Norman Angell (1872–1967), British economist and author; *The Great Illusion*, 1910; *The Great Illusion 1933*, 1933; *The Defence of the Empire*, 1937; *Peace With the Dictators?*, 1938; Nobel Peace Prize, 1933.
63. The so-called Runciman mission, under Walter Runciman (1870–1949), 1st Viscount Runciman of Doxford, arrived in Prague on 3 August, 1938, to discuss German claims to the Sudetenland. The Berchtesgaden agreement, from the conference on 15 September.
64. Whitehall Street in London is the location of many governmental offices.
65. (French) comic opera.