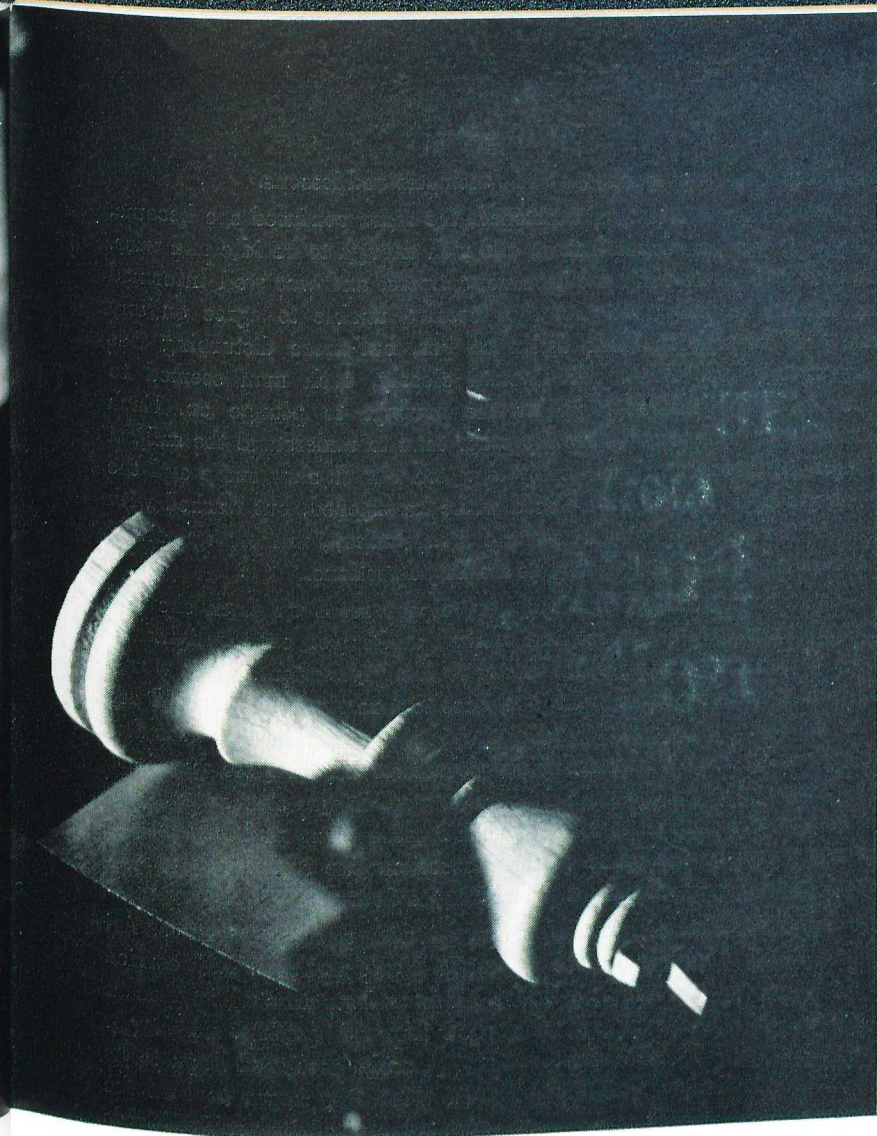


THE DISCUSSION

Marge Berry

It was twilight. Papa and the red-head sat on either side of the neglected chess board talking. The talk would sometimes flow smoothly and coolly, sometimes lethargically with politeness, sometimes rapidly with twists, turns, and mild explosions of anger. After each explosion,



the talk would lapse, and they would each stare vacantly at the chessmen. Then the words would sidle back into their minds and the talk would begin again. Although she spent all mid-day awaiting the red-head's visit after supper, she no longer paid such specific attention to him when he came. It was pleasant enough to sit nearby leafing through her lessons while they talked. Previously, she had tried to follow the discussions. She had felt that perhaps these long twilight hours of talk held the key to the world of men and all that glimmered

faintly beyond her present scope of classmates and lessons.

But the more closely she listened, the more confused she became. Her father was an educated man, and rich enough to be idle and wise. The red-head wrote for American newspapers, and was well informed and careful in judgment. Yet they seemed unable to agree on any issue they considered. This disturbed her, but more disturbing was their uncertainty. When she listened closely, each man seemed to waver in mid-sentence to gather the courage to plunge on. Each seemed to try less to convince the other than to understand the subject himself. And so she began merely to watch Papa's slow smile and the red-head's eyes (which half closed while he listened, but flashed with an almost brutal joy when he made a rejoinder), immersing herself in the flow of talk, but ignoring its shifting directions.

The subject tonight was the war, of course. Even when she had listened closely, this subject had seemed darker for each enlightened word. She would compare the Front to the government. They would ask, which do the people want, and does that matter? They would ask which is best for the nation, and is there really a nation, and does that matter? Then they would really fail to answer any of these questions, but rather ask them again in a different way. It was strange how she understood the literal meaning of each word spoken, and how unable she was to grasp the sense of the discussion. She sighed deeply and turned another page. Then she glanced at the doorway.

Three men stood crowded there, all with apologetic smiles. All were dressed shabbily in the peasant's black uniform. All carried rifles. Papa and the red-head broke off in mid-sentence and stared at the men quizzically. The men walked forward quickly, no longer apologetic. They knocked the chess board aside, motioned Papa to be silent, and turned toward the red-head. Then they began to beat the red-head. The beating was almost quiet, punctuated by muffled thuds and stifled grunts. Then it was over. The three men stood around the red-head, as she lay breathing rapidly. He held his head slightly above the floor and glared at the men, each in turn.

She now found herself shrunk into a trembling crouch beside Papa's chair. It was childish to tremble, she thought, but better to tremble than scream. This thought so pleased her that she stopped trembling and observed the five men coolly. A discussion of the war began, but the peasants supported their rapid statements with slaps at Papa. She did not attempt to understand the discussion, but noted the peasants' confidence. Abruptly, two of the peasants ceased speaking

and grasped Papa's arms. They pulled him out of the room, down the hall and out of ear's reach. The third man picked up his rifle and turned to the red-head. It was strange that she chose to faint now.

I know it is late, she thought. It was very dark outside, and inside the wall clock had stopped. Near the clock lay the red-head. Papa had gone with the men, but that had been hours ago. She could dimly see the red-head, who was staring at the ceiling as if he were listening to the clock, eyes half closed. She sighed and turned another page. Outside, the dawn was commencing.

Jody Neff

Thoughts

My inmost thoughts do dry like withered flowers
That once were gay and begged their petals touch
Against the sky whose blue and gold did much
To heighten aspiration's fruitless hours.
As falling leaves my spirits lose their powers
Of breathing, seeing, but fast descending such—
Sustained—alighting on the frozen crutch
Of frosted, barren earth and icy bowers.