

thousand times to call down fire from heaven upon the Sodom in which he passed his miserable days, but if it were his native city, he could not hear it crash behind him without pain.

LENIN (*who has been listening with his left eye screwed up, and his right eyebrow raised*): If everyone who felt as you do were to turn into a pillar of salt, like Madam Lot, you would at least be of some use in the world.

FRANCE: The notion of being the salt of the earth is not a little alluring. But come now, have you never felt compunction about throwing the whole past into the discard?

LENIN: Have you never felt compunction about preaching water and drinking wine?

FRANCE: Now that is unkind. You know I never spared myself when it came to working for the Cause. How many pretty women I have disappointed in order to keep my promise to speak in some dismal hall to a crowd of ill-smelling comrades! (*He sniffs reminiscently*). How many tender susceptibilities—housed in such charming frames, too,—have I not shocked, how many learned colleagues have I not alienated, how many exquisite moments have I not lost forever, simply to carry on the fight against privilege and to play the oculist a little to poor suffering astigmatic justice! I may have lived too elaborately for your taste, but for me, it was reasonable. I chose always the proper conditions for the creation of what the critics call my masterpieces. And you must admit that my writing was not calculated to please those in high places.

LENIN: I must admit I don't, to any degree, know your writing. Again, I had so little time for that sort of thing. But I'll tell you frankly that if you had come to me, while we were both alive, and asked for a job, I would have sent you away with empty hands. You're not one of us. You can't be. You belong to a decaying culture, and that smells worse in my nostrils than any unwashed proletarian ever did in yours.

FRANCE: Comrade, you are right. You think I talk like a philistine. And so I do. It is this vice of pity that is in me. I am sorry for everyone: I am even sorry for myself. After all, the bourgeois, as well as the workman, must suffer the aches and infirmities of life, of old age,—he too must become incapable of inspiring affection, and at last, for one grows colder with the years, even of feeling the divine passion. The bourgeois, like the workman, must change from a pretty, wicked, clever infant to an ugly, dull, good old man. The bourgeois, like the workman, like you, like me, must die and make an end. The class as a class is evil, but the individual is only pathetic. And I am still enough of an anarchist to be thoughtful of the individual.

LENIN: My dear France, you are neither a Communist nor an anarchist. You are an eloquent chameleon.

FRANCE: That is not true, for then I should be taking my color from you, which I do not.

LENIN (*glancing at France's clerical-*

looking garments): You seem to be taking your colors from the Church.

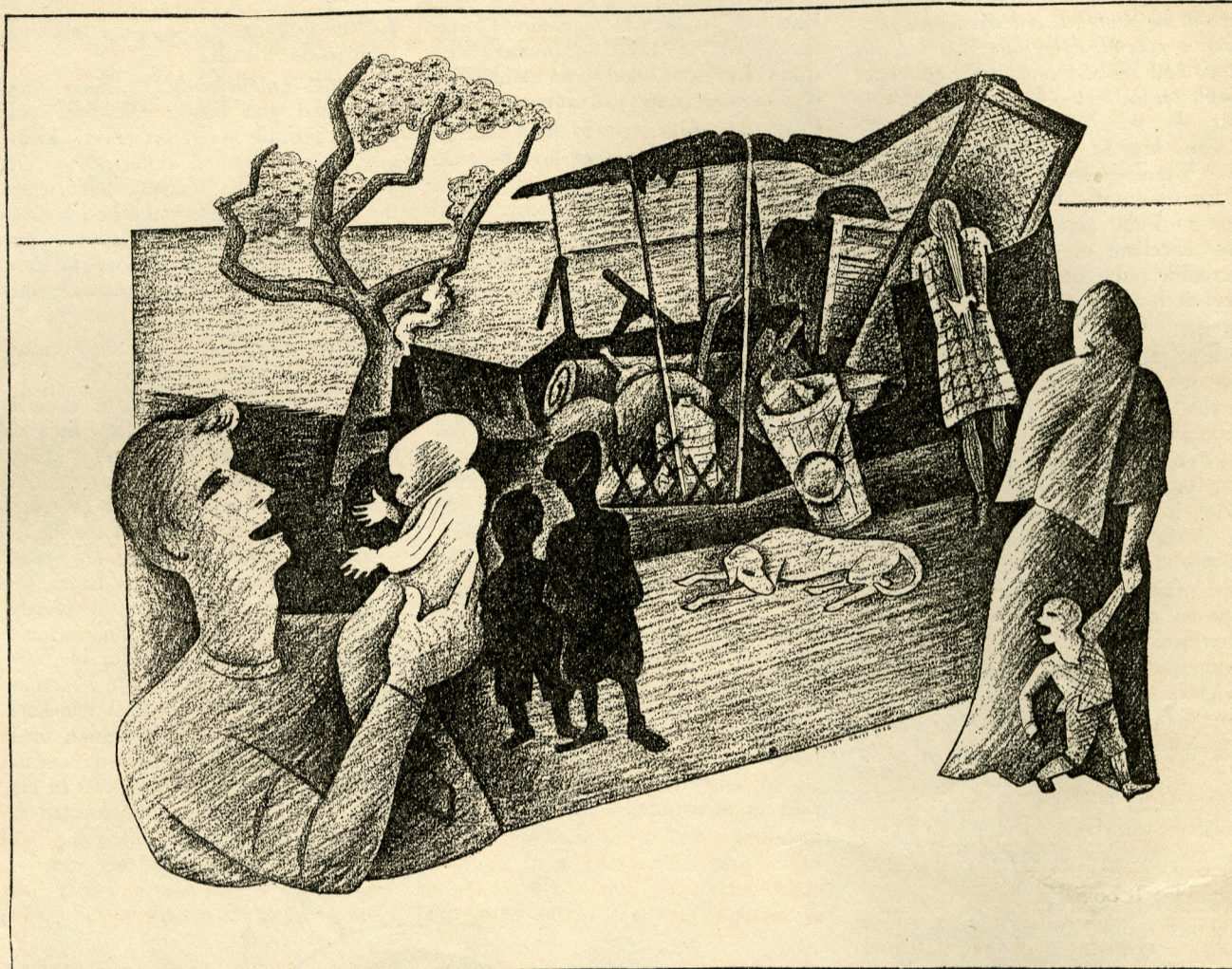
FRANCE: You mean that I show such ecclesiastical tastes? It has been considered a pity that the devil should have all the good things. I feel the same way about the Church. I have ever been devoted to its gorgeous pomp. I always feasted upon the splendor of its ritual. My library was like a chapel,

fortunately, for plain and aging ladies. The lovely ones, like the the stronger sex, have no leisure and patience for vicarious pleasure.

LENIN (*with a twinkle*): And that is how you played—what was the phrase?—the oculist to justice?

FRANCE (*with a shrug*): With me, writing was a necessity—a painful necessity. What could I do? At least,

your precious trinkets and historic curios, your wooden Madonnas and Tanagra dancers? Or is it a royal carcass to be buried in Westminster Abbey or in the tombs of the Medicis, for tourists to gape at, while ugliness and ignorance batten on the tenements and the canneries, the cotton-mills and the wheat-fields, wherever cities rise and earth is under the plow? We



DRAWING BY STUART DAVIS

IN A FLORIDA AUTO CAMP

Don't cry, baby; popper'll sell the spare tire, and we'll look for a new boom somewhere else.

stained with the light from rich glass windows, crowded with religious objects. You cannot conceive the pleasure I took in sitting in that room, dressed in this monkish garb, dictating to some clever young man heresies as round as a priest's paunch.

LENIN: Yes, I can imagine that it amused you. It tickled me, occasionally, to sit in the Romanoff throne-room in the Kremlin, presiding over a meeting of farmers and factory-hands. But more often it just made me uncomfortable. Still (*reflectively*), it was no worse than most of the lodging-houses I had to live in, one time and another. But that's irrelevant. The point is, for whom did you write your beautiful heresies?

FRANCE: For whom is literature created? For women.

LENIN: You wrote for the kept classes.

FRANCE: I wrote for the middle class. The aristocracy, like the peasantry, is largely illiterate. After all, a man does not make pots for savages who eat their meat raw. I wrote for those who would buy my books: the ladies of the bourgeoisie. And, unfor-

I wrote as wisely, as wittily, and as beautifully as lay within my power.

LENIN: My dear France, you are a scholar. Tell me for how many centuries now have wisdom, wit, and beauty been cultivated by men of letters, by artists, by moralists and statesmen, by the whole tribe of those who were born with golden spoons in their mouths? And of what use has it been? Do you suppose the slaves in the silver mines of Laurium led more beautiful lives because Aeschylus was writing his plays in their neighborhood? Do you think that all the books in the British Museum, all the miles of canvases in the Louvre, have taken a jot of the burden from the men who got lead-poisoning making the paints, or from the rag-pickers who brought stuff for pulp to the rag-merchants supplying the paper factories? Do you find it possible to be finicky about the structure of your sentences, and anxious about the charm of your peroration, when you know that for an overwhelming proportion of the human race your efforts are worse than wasted? Is beauty a luxury reserved for the Villa Said, to hang about your chapel-like library, among

have had enough of wisdom in libraries and beauty in museums. If we cannot have beauty and wisdom in life itself, in the existence of those who do the work of the world, then civilization is as rotten as Aristotle and as mean as the worm that eats him.

FRANCE (*to himself*): Still harping on bodily death! How his embalming irks him!

LENIN (*who has overheard*): Yes, I'm a plain man, and I like plain facts. It's an equivocal business, this being a mummy. (*With a rueful smile*): And you do rub it in, you know!

FRANCE: The irony is too exquisite. LENIN (*cheerfully*): But it is only a question of time. If only they make me tyrannize over them sufficiently, there'll surely be a generation of rebels to throw the idol down.

FRANCE: *Exoriet aliquis nostris ab ossibus ultor!* And so you still hope for death?

LENIN: If I may borrow some of your irony, it is, in more senses than one, the hope of mankind.

Curtain